# DISSENT AND PHILOSOPHY IN THE MIDDLE AGES

DANTE AND HIS PRECURSORS

ERNEST L. FORTIN

TRANSLATED BY

MARC A. LePAIN

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*Dissent and Philosophy in the Middle Ages: Dante and His Precursors,* by Ernest L. Fortin, A.A., translation by Marc A. LePain

# Dissent and Philosophy in the Middle Ages

*Dante and His Precursors*

Ernest L. Fortin, A.A.

Translated by Marc A. LePain

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# Foreword

Some of the early commentators on the *Comedy* of Dante Alighieri note that the author was viewed variously: by his readers as a poet, by others as a theologian, and by yet others as a philosopher. Given such circumstances, it stands to reason that a fruitful recovery in our time of Dante's medieval masterwork calls for a reader with a considerable command of the full range of Dante's own intellectual foundations and poetic art. Such a command is to be found in the author of this book.

A priest of the Augustinians of the Assumption, Ernest L. Fortin received a classical liberal education, including theological training in Rome and advanced studies at the Sorbonne in Paris, where he earned the D.-ès-L. degree. His subsequent studies with Leo Strauss at the University of Chicago have equipped him to reflect on the relation of Christianity to the political order in light of the recovery of political philosophy in our time. His work on Dante is the fruit of a sustained meditation on the poet's art of writing in relation to the central themes of Western civilization.

Fortin's *Dissidence et philosophie au moyen-âge: Dante et ses antécédents* was published in 1981 by J. Vrin of Paris and Editions Fides of Montreal. The book seeks to situate Dante's achievement in the context of medieval culture understood in the fullness of its complexities that more often than not have escaped the notice of Dante's modern readers. Appropriately, Dante's name is hardly mentioned until the close of chapter 3, once the author has provided the necessary background for a renewed understanding of his *Comedy*. Only then does he engage the reader in a careful reading of the poem that encompasses Dante's philosophical pursuits, his political concerns, and his relations to Christianity.

The present book is a translation of Fortin's French book of 1981. Professional commitments and personal circumstances have not permitted him to recast the book in an English version as he wished to do. Accordingly, this translation without alteration of the French original will have to stand in place of any such revision. The endnotes to each chapter are substantially the same as in the French. Some notes have been abbreviated in the interest of space but no references to subsequent scholarship have been added to the author's own work.

Readers of this book seeking a broader acquaintance with the author's thought may wish to acquaint themselves with the three volumes of his *Collected Essays,* edited by J. Brian Benestad and published in 1996 by Rowman & Littlefield. Volume 1 includes four essays on the theme of Dante and the Politics of Christendom, one of which, "Dante's *Comedy* as Utopia," is reprinted in the present book as an appendix. Readers may also consult the translator's essay on Dante's "Greyhound" and other contributions to the Festschrift in honor of Fr. Fortin, *Gladly to Learn, Gladly to Teach,* edited by Douglas Kries and Michael Foley and published by Lexington Books.

I wish to acknowledge my indebtedness in the first place to the author for his friendship and guidance over nearly forty years. He has been for me, as for many others, an incomparable mentor. I am grateful to Assumption College for a faculty development grant that enabled me to complete the body of the translation in the summer of 2000 and to the Office of the Provost for encouragement and support at many turns. I owe a great deal to the long-standing support and advice of my Assumption faculty colleagues, particularly Daniel Mahoney and Marc Guerra. Serena Leigh and Jason Hallman of Lexington Books handled my questions cheerfully and expertly, as have Mrs. Diane McGuire, secretary of the Theology Department, and the staff of the college's Computer Services. Finally, for their long-suffering patience and encouraging support, I owe more than I can say to my wife, Patricia, and our children, Maria, Julie, Joseph, and Sarah.

Marc A. LePain

Assumption College
9 June 2001

Throughout the book citations from Dante's *Divine Comedy* are taken from the English translation by Allen Mandelbaum, by kind permission of the publisher, Bantam Books.

# Introduction

This modest work does not pretend to be exhaustive. It seeks to do no more than draw attention to a specific problem which contemporary scholarship has at times overlooked or has not always made sufficiently clear: the reaction of certain medieval thinkers whose orthodoxy was suspect to the threats or censures that weighed on them.

Until recently the problem and the terms in which it was formulated were almost completely unknown to us. Modern historians have been much taken up with the innumerable doctrinal quarrels which engaged philosophers and theologians in the Middle Ages. They have also been taken up with the great political debates of the time and in particular with the acute struggles which for centuries pitted the spiritual and temporal powers against one another. They have devoted a great deal of attention to the measures the Church took to uproot heresy or prevent the diffusion of teachings it deemed false and harmful. On the other hand, to date they have shown little interest in the way many philosophers and poet-philosophers were able, without abandoning their position, if not to resolve, at least to attenuate the conflict that opposed them to their religious or social milieu. This oversight on the part of historians is such that the true nature of this conflict remains in large part obscure. It may be nonetheless that we have here one of the strangest and most remarkable contributions of this entire period.

Among the authors we could have examined closely, there is one particularly suited to our inquiry—Dante, first of all because the problem that concerns us attained its greatest breadth in the Christian world during his time, and second because he supplies the most helpful information for understanding it. Some of the conclusions we have come to will seem daring, even implausible, to scholars formed according to different methods or accustomed to more common ways of thinking. The reader can decide for himself what to think, with the help of the information provided. Accordingly, it is incumbent to lay bare the general principles which have inspired our work, even if in broad strokes and in a still provisional fashion.

In the wake of so many and such brilliant studies on the whole of the medieval tradition and its various representative figures, we must wonder whether there could be anything new to discover in this domain. Yet it would be unfair to the authors of the Middle Ages to think that their thought has been exhausted and that for all practical purposes they have no further secrets to yield. If, as happens from time to time, we feel out of place in their presence, it is not just because their works are often subtle and call for interpretation, but above all because we no longer read them as they wished to be read. Under the influence of Hegel it was long held that they had now been assimilated; that our own perspective was much broader; that, coming as we do after them, we knew more than they did on all the fundamental questions; and that, consequently, we understood them better than they understood themselves.[1]

Our contemporaries show more reserve in this matter. In the wake of the collapse of Hegelian historiography, many among them have renounced the ideal of objectivity or have formed a quite novel conception of this ideal. Our knowledge of authors of the past is neither identical nor superior to their own knowledge, but always “other” than theirs.[2] Each period would thus have its own perspective which would allow it to interpret the works it examines in an original or creative fashion. The intellectual content of these works would not be limited to what the author himself consciously inserted: it would already hold all the meanings that countless generations of readers could draw out over time. No more is needed for us to think that we too have the right to return to that content to examine its unmined riches from a point of view that could only be our own.

This is not the kind of reasoning that justifies our inquiry, however. It was premature to assert, in the name of the experience of history, that our understanding of our predecessors is necessarily different from theirs, or that the reader’s thought is fatally confined to a hermeneutic circle from which it can never escape. History teaches us that the interpretation of works of the past often varies from one period to another, but it does not prove in any way that none of the interpretations that have been given or that could be given do not conform substantively to the thought of the author.[3] To assert confidently that it does

not, one would have to possess that thought already and thus know in advance what in principle we are deemed incapable of knowing. This is why, all things considered, we have found it preferable to hold to the old maxim that does not allow us, pending proof to the contrary, to think ourselves wiser or more clever than the authors we will be dealing with and that assigns us as our first task to attempt to understand them quite simply as they understood themselves.

Although modern hermeneutics has not yet succeeded in demonstrating the impossibility of understanding ancient or medieval authors exactly, it has nonetheless once again brought to light the obstacles besetting such an undertaking, and, at the same time, put the finger on the limits of positivist history as it has been practiced since the nineteenth century. To ensure that his inquiry is scientific, a scholar must not merely agree once and for all to abstract from the prejudices that are forever harming the purity of his gaze, as if it were in his power to forget himself or to efface himself completely before the object of his comtemplation. These prejudices would not be what they are, that is, mere *pre*judgments, if he had already reflected on them and if he were fully aware of them. Whether he wills it or not, his view of the past will be colored from the start by convictions which, without being necessarily or completely false, are rooted in attachments that are stronger than his inclination for the truth ordinarily is. This is tantamount to recognizing that the objectivity he seeks is never or almost never the initial condition of historical research. It could, however, be its fruit and reward. The modern historian, who has so much to unlearn before he can learn anew, most of the time will have to be content with some measure of approximation.

The order we have followed has imposed itself for reasons that can be understood only from the starting point of the treatment's specific object, which is to clarify the mode of expression, at one time called "political," that consists in letting pass beneath a more or less orthodox exterior, thus somewhat deceiving, a teaching or set of teachings whose heterodoxy would otherwise be immediately evident. It would without doubt have been easy to consider Dante's case alone and to leave aside all that did not deal directly with him, but Dante would risk appearing at once more original and less original than he was in reality. In fact, although he is one the few philosophers of his time who practiced this political mode in the Christian world and did so with more imagination than anyone else, he did not invent it whole cloth. It was already known to the Arab and Jewish philosophers who had ably adapted it to their milieu. They seemed of even greater interest to us, since they constitute the only other notable example of philosophic dissimulation up to that point in time in the Middle Ages. By their mode of expression, if not always by their content, their works bear much greater resemblance to Dante's than has been observed, whatever historical ties there may have been among them. Accordingly, after a first chapter that seeks to situate the problem in its broadest context, it seemed to us useful to articulate the essentials of their thought on this precise point.

To be sure, Dante's *Comedy* presupposes a cultural milieu that is very different from those of his Arab and Jewish precursors. It is hard to imagine that medieval Islam and Judaism could ever have given rise to a work so strongly imbued with Greco-Latin humanism. This originality derives in part from the specific character of Christian civilization, which had long been open to numerous classical influences, traces of which are to be found everywhere in the Middle Ages. But one still had to account for the difficulties which this always precarious alliance between ancient wisdom and Christian faith would once again present. In chapter 3 we deal with this challenge as have so many others, but in rather summary fashion and with the sole aim of showing the extent to which the "political" expression of certain ideas held to be dangerous was absent among philosophers of the thirteenth century.

All of these considerations should bring out the political import of Dante's work, to which the remaining chapters are devoted. It would be rash to pretend that we have succeeded in piercing the secret of this work which, like all works of genius, remains in the final analysis inexhaustible. Dante himself was careful to avoid giving his thought the dogmatic character to which other times closer to our own have accustomed us. To speak of him as a thinker is to recognize that he sought to do nothing else than to invite the reader to rethink for himself, in ever new circumstances, the problem of a general order with which, without appearing to, he constantly seeks to engage us. The quarrels between Guelphs and Ghibellines now are only of historical interest to us and would not live on in our imagination if they had not found a powerful echo in the *Comedy*. But this is not the case with the passions that these quarrels bring into play and that go well beyond the narrow confines of the civilization in which they arose.

I would be remiss if I did not take the opportunity to thank the many colleagues or friends who helped me in this inquiry and, in a more particular way, those who had a more immediate part in it: Guy H. Allard, Allan Bloom, Stephen F. Brown, Edouard Jeauneau, Muhsin Mahdi, Betty T. Rahv, and Kathy Yaeger. I owe a particular debt of gratitude to Boston College for a grant that enabled me to put the finishing touches on

the manuscript.

## Notes

1 On the history of this formulation, see O. F. Böllnow, *Das Verstehen: Drei Aufsätze Theorie der Geisteswissenschaften* (Mainz: Kirchheim, 1949); and for the new meaning it acquires as early as Schleiermacher, see H. G. Gadamer, *Truth and Method,* trans. Garrett Barden and John Cumming (London: Sheed and Ward, 1975), 55–63. The phrase appears for the first time, it seems, in Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason,* B370, and Fichte, *Werke,* VI, 337, but in a still traditional sense. According to this usage, an author is understood better than he understood himself when what remains unclear in him is discerned and resolved. This procedure is not the same as mere interpretation, which seeks to explain an author's thought as precisely as possible. It goes without saying that his thought could never be transcended or "critiqued" unless one is certain of having understood it well. On the distinction between "interpretation" and "critique" or "explanation," see Leo Strauss, *Persecution and the Art of Writing* (Glencoe, Ill.: The Free Press, 1952), 143–144. At the highest level, the two procedures are joined, since it is impossible to understand an author completely without at the same time perceiving his limitations.

2 The decisive influence in this matter is without question Nietzsche's untimely meditation "On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life." For this essay's influence on Heidegger, see D. C. Hoy, "History, Historicity, and Modern Philosophy," in M. Murray, ed., *Heidegger and Modern Philosophy* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1978), *329–353.*

3 On this question, see the exchange between Leo Strauss and Hans Georg Gadamer, "Correspondence Concerning *Wahrheit und Methode," The Independent Journal of Philosophy 2* (1978): 5–12.

# CHAPTER ONE

## *On the Political Mode in Philosophy*

The study of how scholars and philosophers conduct themselves in relation to civil or religious authority is part of the larger question of the relations between science and society. This problem is directly connected to the new discipline known as the sociology of knowledge. For the ancients it was above all a theme of political philosophy, which was concerned with all questions relating to the proper governing of cities and in particular to the place of the philosopher within the city, his relations with the city, his responsibilities to his city, and the city's own dispositions toward scientific activity. This philosophy was called political first of all because of its content, given that it pertained, according to Aristotle's well-known distinction, to the domain of practical rather than theoretical thought.[1] Its goal was not simply to understand the nature of civil society but to provide instruction on the way it could be ordered. It was concerned above all with the diverse political regimes, the principles on which they are founded, their specific characteristics, their respective advantages and inconveniences, the means that allow for their improvement and perpetuation, and, eventually, the best regime simply.

Political philosophy understood in this way did not penetrate the Latin world until a relatively late date. While it had played an important role in Arabic philosophic thought since the tenth century and in Jewish philosophic thought since the twelfth, it was only from the second half of the thirteenth century that its influence was fully felt in Christian quarters, thanks to Aristotle's *Politics,* the last of the philosopher's great treatises to be translated into Latin.[2] Christian civilization was not entirely devoid of political thought prior to that time, however. The studies of Walter Ullmann and Beryl Smalley, to cite but two well-known names, have helped us see that as early as the opening years of the twelfth century, even the theologians were not able to keep out of the political wrangles of the time, such as the assassination of Thomas Becket or the confrontation of priesthood and empire, and that they engaged in them with as much ardor as did the canon and civil lawyers.[3] We are indebted to these same theologians for the new political exegesis of the Middle Ages that finds in the texts of the Bible, interpreted according to the rules of the allegorical method, all sorts of unexpected figurations of the current state of Christian society.[4] The young David who slew the giant Goliath with a stone from his shepherd's sack became an image of the pastor or prelate who stands up to the wicked designs of the civil authority. The house of which the Song of Songs speaks represented the Church; its beams of cedar signified the clergy; its rafters, appropriately placed beneath the beams, the temporal power; and so on. No one will venture to maintain, however, that these speculations, reinforced with elements taken from the Church Fathers and from what was known of Cicero and Roman law, put us in the presence of a complete political philosophy capable of standing on its own. We will have occasion to return to the importance of this rediscovery of ancient political philosophy and the consequences that were to flow from it in the West. For the moment we shall simply observe that it offered the writers of that time an overview of human life that owed nothing to the data of revelation and that would soon compete with the view asserted by Christian theology up to that time.[5]

This brings us to a second aspect of the problem, on which we need to insist even more and which is no less important for being less evident. We refer to a kind of thought that could be called political in its *mode,* whatever its content might be and even if it deals with purely theoretical matters. This is not a matter of a particular discipline making its appearance for the first time, but a question of a more general order, which eventually permeated the whole of the thought of some authors and which can be said to affect in some way the entire domain of knowledge. In this new sense, every philosophy can be said to be political in the measure that, while remaining faithful to itself, it deliberately accommodates itself to the opinions of the society in whose midst the philosopher lives.

The ancient philosophers had learned early on and often at their own expense that it was not opportune to communicate to the general public the results of certain investigations that, however justified in themselves, seemed harmful to the well-being of the city. The example of Socrates, who was put to death

for his refusal to renounce the disinterested pursuit of truth, was there to remind them. Nor had they forgotten that, not long before, Anaxagoras had been imprisoned and Protagoras exiled for the same reason. As Plutarch says, “people would not then tolerate natural philosophers and theorists, as they called them then, about things above” on the pretext that their speculations were hostile to the idea of divine power commonly held.[6] The situation, he added, improved somewhat with Plato, whose reputation succeeded in saving philosophy from the discredit into which it had fallen, but it remained precarious, to such an extent that Aristotle later had to remove himself from Athens in order to spare her citizens the shame of another crime against philosophy.[7]

We do not have to look far for the explanation of this phenomenon, which has manifested itself each time that philosophy has experienced renewed vitality in the course of history. Although in itself philosophy is situated on a higher plane than political life, it remains nevertheless at the mercy of the city which, according to its whim, can encourage it, tolerate it, hinder it, or even attempt to make it disappear altogether. Every well-ordered city rests in effect on a certain number of laws whose force depends above all on the respect they command from the citizens. These laws can be reasonable, and they usually are more or less so, but whether they are or not, they derive their efficaciousness from custom much more than from reason.[8] Experience shows that the obedience they demand is often countered by the passions they seek to restrain. To ensure their observance, the legislator must appeal to contrary passions, which only habits developed over a long period of time and carefully nurtured can succeed in engendering. It is impossible in this case to subject the foundation of these laws to a critical examination without attacking, directly or indirectly, the social order in its entirety.

In the *Republic* Socrates had raised the question how a city that opens itself to philosophy could escape being destroyed.[9] If he undertakes to found a new city it is because he thinks that “not one city today is in a condition worthy of the philosophic nature.”[10] Only the city he speaks of with his interlocutors will be favorable to the flowering of philosophy and amenable to establishing with it common bonds rooted in nature and not in an implicit contract similar, for example, to the one mentioned in the *Crito*.[11] Unfortunately, this perfect or fully rational city exists only in speech.[12] As Plato himself observes, for such a city to become a reality, all its citizens would have to be gods or the offspring of gods, for only once they are freed from every constraint arising from their bodily nature could they transform themselves into perfect lovers of justice.[13] The solution proposed by the *Republic* remains utopian to the extent that it is based on the concurrence of an infinite number of fortuitous circumstances which for that reason escape the control of the legislator.[14] Among these circumstances the most important is the philosopher’s accession to supreme power,[15] for he alone possesses the knowledge and experience required to lead men to their proper end.[16] But true philosophic natures are rare[17] and they generally have no attraction to public life, which turns them away from the only good that interests them.[18] They will thus need to be compelled. Even if the ideal candidate were available at the right time, it does not follow that the people will be disposed to accept him or be willing to accede to his demands.[19] The best then would be to expel all citizens over the age of ten and to start anew, assuming that one had the means, which is clearly not the case.[20] This is just a short step away from concluding that the perfectly just society has never existed and never will.

All actual cities are like those known to Socrates in that each is necessarily imperfect, and the more it is, the more it risks being harsh on its critics. One can readily understand that the civil authorities distrusted philosophers and often made life hard for them. The case of the Greek philosophers we referred to is far from unique. It is rather typical and for a long time it haunted the souls of their successors, who felt that they too risked the same dangers.[21] The fate reserved to them through the ages—persecution, ostracism, condemnation, imprisonment, death, or threat of death—makes it clear that their fears were not without foundation.[22]

Indeed, if Greece, the birthplace of philosophy, was not always hospitable to the practitioners of philosophy, other societies were even less so. Rome thought it necessary to close the door on Greek learning once it began to spread in the second century B.C. In *The City of God,* St. Augustine at length discusses the roundabout ways the thinkers of that time employed to keep out of danger. Scaevola and Varro did not dare to say publicly the whole truth concerning the gods of the city. They felt bound by customs they disapproved but about which they could do nothing.[23] Seneca behaved in the same way, despite the fact that he was “emancipated by the philosophers.” He, too, was compelled to take part in the rites of civil theology without placing any stock in them, though fulfilling his duties in the eyes of the people. In his view the role of the wise man was “to simulate conformity in act while having no religious attachment.”[24]

But we are not limited to the testimony of the Church Fathers. Cicero noted that “philosophy is content

with few judges, and deliberately flees the multitude and is in her turn an object of suspicion and dislike to them, with the result that if anyone should be disposed to revile all philosophy he could count on popular support."[25] That means that philosophers have to go about their business with great caution. Cicero's own dialogues provide a wealth of examples of this circumspect posture. Thus, in *On the Commonwealth,* he has his mouthpiece, Scipio, say that he is not satisfied with what the greatest Greek thinkers have written on the question of the best regime and that on this matter especially he finds them clearly inferior to the Romans.[26] When asked to give his account of the best regime, Scipio carefully avoids sketching a new city after the manner of Socrates and instead takes as a model ancient Rome and its history, which he praises excessively.[27] Only much later, and as if by chance, do we learn that such an example will never suffice and that the only perfect city is one rooted in nature, exactly as the Greek philosophers he pretended to mock had taught.[28]

All these precautions seem minimal compared to those in force in the time of the empire. To appreciate this, we have only to listen to what Tacitus says about the reign of Domitian in a famous passage of *Agricola*:

> We have read that the panegyrics pronounced by Arulenus Rusticus on Paetus Thrasea, and by Herennius Senecio on Priscus Helvidius, were made capital crimes, that not only their persons but their very books were objects of rage, and that the triumvirs were commissioned to burn in the forum those works of splendid genius. They fancied, forsooth, that in that fire the voice of the Roman people, the freedom of the Senate, and the conscience of the human race were perishing, while at the same time they banished the teachers of philosophy, and exiled every noble pursuit, that nothing good might anywhere confront them. Certainly we showed a magnificent example of patience; as a former age had witnessed the extreme of liberty, so we witnessed the extreme of servitude, when the informer robbed us of the interchange of speech and hearing. We should have lost memory as well as voice, had it been as easy to forget as to keep silence.[29]

The repressions no doubt were not always so harsh, or otherwise it is hardly likely that Tacitus would have been able to speak in this way. He adds that "Now at last our spirit is returning" though not without taking into consideration that the new era was perhaps but a moment's respite, one the rare blessings—"*rara temporum felicitas*"—one had to take advantage of, as in the reigns of Nerva and Trajan, "when we may think what we please, and express what we think."[30] Would it always be this way? One could doubt it. This is what explains that in his works candor is often mixed with prudence, for they would be read by those who came after him and who would not always enjoy the same liberty.[31]

To their chagrin, the early modern writers at times set aside this elementary prudence, but they soon returned to it, especially after the death of Giordano Bruno, who was burned at the stake in 1600, and the condemnation of Galileo, which dissuaded other authors from publishing certain works which there was reason to fear would not be received any better.[32] Francis Bacon thought it best "to keep way with antiquity *usque ad aras"* and to retain the ancient terms even though he altered their uses or definitions, since "they holdeth which Tacitus wisely noted, '*eadem magistratuum vocabula.*'"[33] Thus he advised that he "thought it good to make some pause upon that which is received, that thereby the old may be more easily made perfect and the new more easily approached . . . , for 'He that is ignorant (says the proverb) receives not the words of knowledge, unless thou must first tell him that which is in his own heart.'"[34] The first of his maxims that Descartes sets down in his "provisional code of morals" is "to obey the laws and customs of my country" and to govern himself in all other things "according to the most moderate opinions and those furthest from excess—opinions that were commonly accepted in practice by the most judicious of those with whom I would have to live."[35] Spinoza speaks in the same fashion in *On the Improvement of the Understanding,* convinced as he was of the need to speak *ad captum vulgi* and to conform to every custom that did not pose an obstacle to the achievement of his goal. For him this was a way of garnering the goodwill of the multitude, for "we can gain from the multitude no small advantages, provided that we strive to accommodate ourselves to its understanding as far as possible."[36] We should bear in mind that Spinoza himself published only one work under his own name, *The Principles of Cartesian Philosophy,* which nevertheless did not prevent his contemporaries from marveling at the boldness of his thought.[37]

Even with precautions such as these, these writers did not succeed in avoiding every danger. Even while he lived abroad, Descartes had to change residence some twenty times and appeal to the prince of Orange

for protection. Spinoza found that he had to leave Amsterdam, and the decree of excommunication against him has never been lifted. Thanks to their efforts and those of their contemporaries, most Western nations have become more tolerant and have even ended up making tolerance a matter of principle as much as practice. Yet one should not forget that the freedom of speech they treasure today is a benefit that has not always been there or which one can count on everywhere. Goethe's Faust may not have been completely off the mark when he exclaimed:

> The things that people claim to know!
> Who dares to call the child by its true name?
> The few who saw something like this and, starry-eyed
> But foolishly, with glowing hearts averred
> Their feelings and their visions before the common herd
> Have at all times been burned or crucified.[38]

In the face of similar situations, how will a thinker react who refuses to be silent as others would demand him to be and who at the same time foresees the serious consequences to which he is subject if he does speak? Our modern world has provided an original solution to this problem, which consists in enshrining what are commonly called human rights, and, if all else fails, in claiming them for oneself or someone else. This presupposes, among other things, that there is agreement on the nature of these rights, that everyone concurs in recognizing them, and that there is a way to ensure their observance by those who would want to infringe on them. That is asking a good deal already. We also should have no illusions on the efficaciousness of this kind of undertaking, which often ends up provoking new reprisals against those whom it is intended to help.

However that may be, the ancient and medieval philosophers did not institute these universal rights that every society is supposed to respect. Even if they had known of them, it is far from certain they would have had recourse to them in their situation. Instead they acknowledged that political life also had its demands, which rarely coincide with those of the philosophic life, entirely focused on truth. They understood that they would never succeed in enlightening the minds of all nor in uprooting all the prejudices that held sway around them. They especially saw that they could not overlook the social milieu that was the indispensable context of their activity and that consequently it was incumbent on them to take into consideration the effect their investigations were likely to have on their fellow citizens. For this reason, without changing anything of the core of their thought, they undertook to express it in a new mode that, following others, we have called "political." That philosophy which everywhere speaks openly, as Thomas More asserted, has "no place among kings," but there is

> another philosophy, more practical for statesmen, which knows its stage, adapts itself to the play in hand, and performs its role neatly and appropriately. This is the philosophy which you must employ. Otherwise we have the situation in which a comedy of Plautus is being performed and the household slaves are making trivial jokes at one another and then you come on the stage in a philosopher's attire and recite the passage from the Octavia where Seneca is disputing with Nero. Would it not have been preferable to take a part without words than by reciting something inappropriate to make a hodgepodge of comedy and tragedy? You would have spoiled and upset the actual play by bringing in irrelevant matter—even if your contribution would have been superior in itself. Whatever play is being performed, perform it as best you can, and do not upset it all simply because you think of another which has more interest.[39]

This all comes down to saying that a writer who does not want to run risks will write habitually in such a way as not to be understood in the same way by everyone. He will almost always be concerned to conceal his thought, while letting it show through for the small number of those who would want to take the trouble to look for it. His books would, so to speak, contain a twofold teaching: one addressed to the general public, the other reserved for an elite that could be trusted.[40] In order to grasp its meaning, the careful reader himself will have to distinguish what the author held to be true and what he asserted only out of a practical concern or out of respect for the opinions of others.

On this score Cicero confessed his preference for Socrates, who was the first to bring philosophy into the

city and whose method seemed particularly felicitous in allowing him at one and the same time to combat error and conceal his own thought: "*ut nostram ipsi sententiam taceremus.*"[41] Socrates "far surpassed all others for accomplished wit in this strain of irony or assumed simplicity."[42] The matter would be taken up often in the course of the centuries. In *De augmentis scientiarum*, Francis Bacon likewise juxtaposed the "initiative method," which is addressed to the "sons of science" and lays bare his secrets, and the "magistral method," which is intended for a wider audience and engenders nothing more than belief. Bacon also distinguished between "exoteric" teaching accessible to every reader and "acroamatic" teaching intended only for the elect.[43] This might seem an elementary and long-standing pedagogical principle according to which science is not for everyone and consequently different approaches are needed to teach the truth to learned men and to ordinary people. Without denying that this is often the case, it seems more precise to say that it is a matter of two teachings that are distinct and even diametrically opposed to one another. St. Augustine speaks of this unambiguously when he rebukes the Roman jurists and philosophers for having deliberately misled the people in matters of religion and presented as true many doctrines which they themselves held to be false.[44]

It goes without saying that this way of proceeding requires that an author have certain literary gifts which only the greatest writers have possessed to an eminent degree. Those who made use of it nonetheless had at their disposal a number of means which they could employ as they saw fit. Instead of saying everything, they could be content with a few discreet allusions, knowing that most people tend to judge the importance of a subject by the number of pages devoted to it. They could announce a theme that would not be developed as such in what follows, or, inversely, abruptly take up a question which they had been careful not to announce, as Machiavelli does in some places.[45] They could enunciate the premises of an argument without saying a word of the consequences which flow from it once one starts to think about the matter. They could express themselves with the help of symbols, the interpretation of which remained ambiguous and consequently open to discussion. They could cite their sources mistakenly or out of context or incompletely, leaving to the reader the task of discovering their error and drawing the necessary conclusions. Thus Rousseau, in appealing to the authority of Plutarch to attack the arts and sciences, reports only the first part of the passage, the only part that is favorable to the thesis he defends openly, and leaves aside the rest, the part that also conveys his own thinking on the question. [46] If they were writing dialogues, they could put their ideas in the mouths of their characters, while appearing to reprove them. In *De natura deorum,* Cicero takes the side of Balbus, who defends the existence of the gods, rather than that of Cotta, who has just called it into question.[47] As St. Augustine observes, however, when Cicero takes up the question again in another work, he there sides with the position that Cotta sought to maintain, apparently without success.[48] More frequently, they could contradict themselves, affirming in one place what they squarely denied in another, since that also served to cover their tracks. Hobbes claimed that he had said nothing in his *Leviathan* or his other treatises that was contrary to the word of God.[49] The reader who has followed his line of reasoning from the beginning finds it hard to understand how such an assertion can be reconciled with what is said in these works about religious belief and its relations to civil society.[50]

We are sometimes taken aback by the number of contradictions that are to be found even in philosophers who are reputed to be rigorous thinkers. If the average reader has no difficulty in seeing these contradictions, it is hard to acknowledge that they could have escaped the notice of the author himself. Will it be said that the author quite simply changed his mind on this or that point, without concerning himself to alert us to that fact and that only the position he took in the last instance ought to be taken as his own? Perhaps, especially when it is a matter of two different works whose dates of composition are well known. But we will never be absolutely certain. And what if the contradiction appears within the same work? Will we always appeal to the same hypothesis? There exists another explanation which must be considered and which does not seem any less possible, that the author has contradicted himself by design and for reasons that it was in his best interest not to make known.[51] If his teaching is dangerous, it is easily understandable that he would want to keep open the possibility of clearing himself in the event of his being caught.

Obviously this does not mean that even the greatest authors never made a mistake; in that case they would all think the same and we would not have to choose among them. But just as one can err without contradicting oneself, so also one can contradict oneself without erring, and if so many authors did so in times more or less remote from our own, it is very likely because they saw in this procedure a privileged means of evading the watchful eye of their censors. We always come back to the idea of a political mode thanks to which the writer, with even modest skills, succeeds in covering his thought with a garb that conceals a deeper meaning from readers who are inattentive or little concerned for precision while maintining access to that meaning to a few readers, who are already informed and who know more or less what to expect.

The modern reader is often put off by such an attitude that seems in the highest degree dishonest and wherein he often detects nothing but disdain for the vulgar or pure cynicism.[52] It suffices to examine it more closely, however, to observe that it bears only a superficial resemblance to the attitude of the cynic. The latter sees only the petty side of things and always seeks to explain the higher by the lower. His gaze is perspicacious, which is what makes him interesting, but, since his soul lacks greatness, he is incapable of appreciating it in the soul of another and always sees there only hypocrisy or vain pretense.[53] Hence his disdain for all that passes as noble or worthy of admiration. Moreover, he is a stranger to indignation, for only a moral man will be indignant at the injustices that are committed around him. Altogether different is the state of mind of the philosopher, who, without being any less perspicacious, knows himself well enough to take into account his responsibilities toward those who surround him. To be sure, he too does not always share their sentiments, but, seeing things from above, he knows how to acknowledge their worth and show them the proper respect, and if injustice does not provoke his indignation to any greater extent, it is not because he lacks the means to condemn them, but because his only passion is for truth.

Having said that, we must for the sake of precision distinguish more clearly than we yet have done between the ancients on the one hand and their modern successors on the other. The latter were not content to communicate their secret thoughts to those whom they wanted to draw to their cause; they were forthright in calling for freedom of inquiry and freedom of speech, something which no one had yet thought to do. Since their ultimate goal was to prepare a future in which no one ever again would have to suffer for having dared to speak what he believed to be true, they had to express themselves more openly than would have been the case in earlier times. Their esotericism in the last analysis remains provisional and linked to conditions which it was hoped would some day disappear. If we have taken some of our examples from them, it was with the sole intention of illustrating, in summary fashion and rather imprecisely, the nature of this political mode that manifested itself in diverse ways at diverse times and which we shall soon meet again in the authors of the Middle Ages.

But it is also necessary at least to make mention of the great philosophical and literary works of the Renaissance that could also provide us with testimonies. We have left them aside only because numerous studies have already revealed their peculiar character. By way of example, we shall consider the myth of the “frozen words” that Rabelais used to good advantage in chapter 56 of his Fourth Book, where it serves as a prelude to his account of the battle of the Arimaspians against the Nephelibates. These words are indeed strange: they turn into ice and become silent in the cold air, but they melt and are heard again once winter passes and good weather returns. This pleasant fantasy conceals a deeper meaning that seems to be part of what V. L. Saulnier proposes to call the “political hesuchism” or “non-preaching evangelism” of the author. There are times when it is better to keep silence and to let the storms pass. Instead of selling words, as lawyers do, Pantagruel would rather sell silence. One does not pick a fight he is sure to lose. “Since those in power persecute those who spread the good word, and since experience shows that the preacher is incapable of making the public understand, let us refrain from speaking: what point is there to persist in a useless imprudence?” [54] To keep silent, or, more exactly, to measure one’s words: speaking while laughing and laughing while speaking, but not just to laugh. It may be the case that the parties who are present, the Arimaspians and the Nephelibates, the innovators or the traditionalists, are both in the wrong. The day will come when the words, preserved in ice, will speak again, not for all to hear—most members in the retinue do not succeed in figuring them out—but for those who want to understand and have the capacity to do so. It was on the whole the most effective way to attain one’s goal.

The Christian world did not have to await the work of the Renaissance humanists to rediscover this method of disguise or voluntary obscurity, however. The humanists were only following, in another sense and for other motives, the course that had been charted for them by Dante and his medieval disciples. We would be mistaken in thinking that Dante himself represents in this regard an absolute point of departure. What he accomplished through an essentially poetic work had already been attempted by Arab and Jewish philosophers in an impressive series of treatises and commentaries whose philosophic significance eluded modern scholars for a long time. Thanks to the renewal of medieval studies, these works are now happily better known to us than they were formerly, but it must also be said that the tendency has been to study them less in themselves than in their rapport with Christian scholasticism, which they did not cease to feed but compared to which they appear clearly inferior. We shall see that it is rather by their political aspect, and thus more by what separates them from than by what joins them to scholasticism, that they can help us from a distance to understand the work of Dante.

## Notes

1 See Aristotle, *Posterior Analytics* I, 33, 89b7–11; *Metaphysics* I, 1, 981b25; V, 1, 1025b19–25; *Nicomachean*

*Ethics* I, 13, 1103a3–10; VI, 3, 1139a26–31; and X, 8, 1178a8–24.

2 The fundamental study is still M. Grabmann, *Die mittelalterlichen Kommentare zur Politik des Aristoteles* (Munich: Verlagder Bayerischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1941).

3 See W. Ullmann, *A History of Political Thought: The Middle Ages* (Baltimore: Penguin 1965); *Law and Politics in the Middle Ages* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1975). Thomas M. Jones, *The Becket Controversy and the Schools: A Study of Intellectuals in Politics in the Twelfth Century* (Totowa, N.J.: Rowman & Littlefield, 1973).

4 See B. Smalley, *The Study of the Bible in the Middle Ages* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1952), 30–36, which fittingly completes the monumental study of H. deLubac, *Exégèse médiévale: les quatre sens de l'Écriture*, 4 volumes (Paris: Aubier, 1959–1964).

5

> The cosmological revolution which the absorption of Aristotle wrought in the 13th century displayed its greatest effects in the sphere of governmental science. What secular governments, writers, jurists, polemicists, had been groping for, especially in the period since the Investiture Contest, was now presented by Aristotle in the form of a natural unit that had grown entirely in accordance with the laws of nature, wholly independent of divine intervention and grace or theological or other speculative reflexions. . . . For what the Aristotelian revolution effected in the thirteenth century was a rebirth of the very creature that had been hibernating for many a century, that is, natural man or the man of the flesh who, as St. Paul had taught, was successfully washed away by baptismal water which infused divine grace into the recipient and turned him into 'a new creature.'" (W Ullmann, *Law and Politics,* 269)

6 Plutarch, *Life of Nicias,* 23, 4, in *The Lives of the Noble Grecians and Romans,* trans. John Dryden and rev. by Arthur Hugh Clough (New York: The Modern Library, n.d.), 645.

7 See Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of the Philosophers,* V, 1, 5.

8 See Aristotle, *Politics* II, 8, 1268b25–1269a28, in which Aristotle criticizes Hippodamus, the first political philosopher (1267b28–29), for having encouraged scientific discoveries without concerning himself in any way with the upheavals these discoveries could provoke within the city.

9 See Plato, *Republic* VI, 497d–502c.

10 Plato, *Republic* VI, 497b, trans. Allan Bloom (New York: Basic Books, 1968), 176. On Socrates and his interlocutors as "founders," see II, 369c, 379a; and IV, 427c.

11 See Plato, *Republic* VI, 520a–e; and Crito 49e, 50c, 52d–e.

12 See Plato, *Republic* V, 472d–e; and IX, 592a.

13 See Plato, *Laws* V, 739a–e. This appears to be the only passage in the *Laws* in which explicit allusion is made to the *Republic.* The chief obstacles to justice stem from the fact that men habitually prefer their own good (wife, children, material possessions) to the common good; see also *Republic* V, 457d ff.

14 This ideal is not a dream (see *Republic* VII, 540d); it is without any internal contradiction and thus is not in itself an impossibility. Rather, it corresponds to what is most desirable, although its actualization most of the time meets with almost insurmountable obstacles. See *Republic* V, 456c; VI, 499d, 502c; and in the same vein, Aristotle, *Politics* IV, 1, 1288b24–39; and VII, 4, 1325b33–40.

15 See Plato, *Republic* V, 473c–e; as well as VI, 487e, 501e.

16 See Plato, *Republic* VI, 484c–d.

17 See Plato, *Republic* V, 476b; VI, 491b, 496a–b, 503b, and *passim.* On the causes of the corruption of the philosophic nature, the chief of which is the political life and its attractions, see also VI, 490e–495b; and on the causes of its preservation, VI, 496a–497a.

18 See Plato, *Republic* VI, 499b–c, 500d; and VII, 519c–520c, 521b, 539e.

19 See especially Plato, *Republic* VI, 487e–489d; VII, 494a; and *Phaedo* 64b.

20 See Plato, *Republic* VIII, 541a.

21 St. Albert the Great recalled these dangers in the epilogue to his *Commentary on the Politics of Aristotle:*

> I have said nothing else regarding this book except to explain what is said there and to adhere to its reasons and causes. As with the case of all the natural books, I have never said anything of my own, but I have explained the opinions of the Peripatetics as faithfully as I could. I say this on account of those lazy minds who, seeking comfort in their laziness, look for nothing in books except what they reprehend; and since such men are sluggish in their laziness, lest they alone should appear lazy, they seek to place blame on the elect. Such were those who put Socrates to death, caused Plato to flee from Athens to the Academy, and combated Aristotle until they forced him to leave. As Aristotle himself said, "there never was lacking in Athens pyre upon pyre, that is, evil upon evil. I will not allow the Athenians to sin against philosophy twice." (*Commentarii in libros VIII Politicorum Aristotelis*, ed. Borgnet, VIII (Paris, 1891), 803 [English translation by MAL])

22 See the examples cited by L. Strauss, *Persecution and the Art of Writing,* 32–33.

23

> There remains the possibility that he [Varro] is to be supposed to have written about no aspect of divinity at all; and that he was reluctant to admit this explicitly and left it to be inferred by the intelligent reader. . . . he states this more clearly in another place, where he acknowledges that he would have written on the principles dictated by nature, if he had been founding a new community; but since he found himself in a community already ancient, the only course open to him was to conform to its traditional ways. (St. Augustine, *The City of God* VI, 4, trans. Henry Bettenson [Hammondsworth, England: Penguin Books, 1984], 233–234. See also IV, 27, 30, 31; and VI, 1, 5–9)

24 St. Augustine, *City of God* VI, 10.

25 Cicero, *Tusculan Disputations* II, 1, 4.

26 See Cicero, *On the Commonwealth* I, 22, 36.

27 See Cicero, *On the Commonwealth* I, 46, 70; and II, 1, 3: "I shall more easily accomplish the task set me, if I picture our commonwealth at the moment of its birth, in the course of its development, and then in the strength and vigor of its maturity, instead of arbitrarily creating an imaginary state, as Socrates does in Plato's *Republic*" (Trans. G. H. Sabine and S. B. Smith [Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, n.d], 155).

28 "Moreover, my use of our own state as an example did not serve the purpose of defining the perfect state, for that could have been done without any example" (Cicero, *On the Commonwealth* II, 39, 66, 190–191).

29 Tacitus, *Agricola,* 2–3, in *The Complete Works of Tacitus,* trans. Alfred John Church and William Jackson Brodribb (New York: Modern Library, 1942), 677–678.

30 Tacitus, *Histories* I, 1, in *Complete Works,* 419–420.

31 On Tacitus's prudence and his desire not to treat openly (*scopertamente*) the well-kept secrets (*arcana*) of politics and human nature, see the valuable remarks of Traiano Boccalini, *La bilancia politica: osservazioni sopra gli Annali di Cornelio Tacito* (Venice, 1674), iii; and, on Tacitus's way of writing, James C. Leake, "Tacitus' Teaching and the Decline of Liberty at Rome," *Interpretation; a journal of political philosophy* 15, 55–96 and 195–308.

32 See Descartes, *Discourse on Method,* Part Six, where the author alludes to Galileo without naming him, in saying that the latter's recent condemnation made it necessary for him to change his intention to publish his own treatise, *Le Monde.* On this same point, see Descartes's letter to Mersenne, dated late November 1633.

33 Francis Bacon, *Of the Advancement of Learning,* II, 7, 2.

34 Bacon, *The Great Instauration,* "The Plan of the Work."

35 René Descartes, *Discourse on Method,* Part Three, trans. Donald Cress (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1998), 13.

36 Benedict Spinoza, *On the Improvement of the Understanding,* first rule of life, trans. R. H. M. Elwes, *The Chief Works of Benedict de Spinoza* (London: Bell and Sons, 1906), II, 7.

37 See, for example, Spinoza's praise of Machiavelli in his *Theologico-Political Treatise,* V, 7. On this aspect of Spinoza's thought, see Strauss, *Persecution,* 152 and 182ff.

38 Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Faust,* 588–593, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Doubleday, 1961), 109.

39 Thomas More, *Utopia,* Part I, ed. E. Surtz (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1964), 49. The word "politic" is used in an analogous, albeit pejorative, sense by Gregory Nazianzus. See *Letter* 58, 8.

40 See Plato, *Republic* V, 450e; and *Gorgias,* 487a. There are some truths which should be communicated only to an audience that is not "without judgment, or distrustful, or ill-willed." If the addressee lacks intelligence, he will not understand properly; if he is hostile, he may turn against the speaker. In both cases, he should not be trusted.

41 Cicero, *Tusculan Disputations* V, 4, 10–11.

42 Cicero, *De oratore* 67, 272, trans. E. W. Sutton and H. Rackham, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1948), 403. See also St. Augustine, *City of* God VIII, 4: "Plato makes a point of preserving the manner of his master Socrates, whom he introduces as a disputant in his books. It is well known that Socrates was in the habit of concealing his knowledge, or his beliefs; and Plato approved of that habit. The result is that it is not easy to discover his own opinion, even on important matters."

43 Francis Bacon, *De augmentis scientiarum* VI, 2, in Works, ed. Spedding and Ellis, II (Boston: Brown and Taggard, 1860), 428–430. On Bacon's esotericism, see Howard B. White, *Peace among the Willows: The Political Philosophy of Francis Bacon* (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1968), 109–112.

44 See Augustine, *City of God* IV, 27: "The pontiff [Scaevola] did not wish the people to be aware of this; he did not think the statements were untrue. Thus he held that it was expedient for communities to be deceived in matters of religion;" and IV, 31: "1 should rightly be suspected of indulging in conjecture here, if Varro had not openly declared in another place, on the subject of religious rites, that there are many truths which it is not expedient for the general public to know, and, further, many falsehoods which it is good for the people to believe true." On the strongly controverted interpretation of these passages, see J. Pépin, *Mythe et allégorie: les origines grecques et les contestations judéo-chrétiennes* (Paris: Études augustiniennes, 1976), 12–28; and E. L. Fortin, "St. Augustine and Roman Civil Religion (De Civ. Dei, IV, 27): Some Critical Reflections," *Revue des études augustiniennes* 26 (1980): 238–256. In Pépin's view, it was wrong for Augustine to impute such duplicity to Scaevola. Since Roman religion was more a matter of practice than of dogmas or beliefs, the question would never have arisen in such terms for the pontiffs. Cicero's *De natura deorum* shows, however, that the beliefs one holds regarding the gods are not foreign to one's religious practices and that the latter are necessarily threatened by philosophic skepticism. See, for

example, *De natura deorum* II, 67, 168; and III, 1, 3–4.

45 See chapter 11 of *The Prince,* which deals with ecclesiastical principalities, a subject not mentioned in the plan of the book announced in chapter 1.

46 See Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Discourse on the Arts and Sciences,* the beginning of Part Two, where, to explain the frontispiece, Rousseau cites in a note the following passage from Plutarch in Amyot's translation: "the satyr wanted to kiss and embrace fire the first time he saw it; but Prometheus cried out to him: Satyr, you will mourn the beard on your chin, for fire burns when one touches it." Plutarch adds however: "but it gives light and warmth, and is an implement serving all crafts providing one knows how to use it well." *The First and Second Discourses,* ed. Roger D. Masters, trans. Judith R. Masters (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1964), 47–48 and 70, n. 33. See, in addition, Machiavelli, *Discourses* I, 26, which applies to King David what the New Testament says about God, "who filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty." The meaning the author gives to this citation, the only one taken from the New Testament in the *Discourses,* becomes clear in the commentary that follows: "These words are very cruel, and enemies to every way of life, not only Christian but human," although it is necessary to have recourse to them if a ruler wishes to maintain himself. *Discourses on Livy,* trans. Harvey C. Mansfield and Nathan Tarcov (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 61.

47 See Cicero, *De natura deorum* III, 40, 95.

48 See Augustine, *City of God* V, 9.

49 See Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* IV, Conclusion.

50 See Hobbes, *Leviathan* I, 12; and II, 29. On Hobbes's atheism, see R. Polin, *Politique et philosophie chez Thomas Hobbes* (Paris, 1953), xv and 139–140; L. Strauss, "On the Basis of Hobbes's Political Philosophy," in *What Is Political Philosophy?* (Glencoe, Ill.: Free Press, 1950), 182–189.

51 On this question, see Leo Strauss, "On a Forgotten Kind of Writing," in *What Is Political Philosophy?,* 223–224. See also Maimonides, *The Guide of the Perplexed,* Introduction, 9b–12a Munk.

52 See, by way of example, Pépin, *Mythe et allégorie,* 18.

53 On this score, see Nietzsche's amusing definition of the cynic as a belly with two requirements and a head with but one—vanity, in *Beyond Good and Evil,* no. 26.

54 V. L. Saulnier, "Le silence de Rabelais et le mythe des paroles gelées," in *Travaux d'humanisme et de renaissance* VII (Genève: E. Droz, 1953), 233–247.

# CHAPTER TWO

## *Islam and the Rediscovery of Political Philosophy*

### The Birth of Arab Aristotelianism

Political philosophy as it was known in the Middle Ages first appeared in Muslim milieus at the beginning of the tenth century. We are regrettably poorly informed regarding the circumstances surrounding its discovery. A fragment of a lost work by al-Farabi, the great founder of the Arabic philosophic tradition, shows that this first contact with philosophy took place through the intermediary of Christian philosophers and theologians who at the time of the Arab conquest took refuge from Alexandria to Antioch, and later from Antioch to Baghdad, where toward the end of the ninth century Christians and Muslims were rubbing elbows.[1]

The same fragment informs us that the teaching of philosophy to Christians did not extend beyond the first part of Aristotle's *Posterior Analytics,* but that nothing stood in the way of going beyond that limit when it came to teaching Muslims. The motive for this prohibition can easily be guessed. In effect, from chapter 8 of Book I onward, Aristotle takes up more explicitly the notion of science and its various instruments, the further study of which would pose a threat to the faith of young Christians.[2] Muslim students obviously ran the same risk, but their case was no cause for concern, since to shake their religious convictions would be to their benefit. It was thus under his Christian masters that al-Farabi became acquainted with the rest of Aristotle's logic and eventually the whole of his philosophy and thereafter became its interpreter and undertook to transmit it to his successors.[3]

The preceding centuries had witnessed numerous contacts between Islam and certain later philosophic currents, notably Stoicism and Neoplatonism, as well the full array of mystical or pseudoscientific doctrines of diverse origins, such as Oriental gnosis or Manichaeism, the Chaldean Oracles, alchemy, and astrology, in which for centuries even the cultured minds of the Near East had taken delight. Other thinkers had experienced an analogous attraction to science, whose development would be fostered, from the ninth century onward, by the proliferation of new Arabic translations of nearly all of the major Greek philosophic texts. It suffices to name, among al-Farabi's immediate predecessors or contemporaries, al-Kindi and the physician al-Razi, who stand as precursors inasmuch as they seem not to have belonged to any theological school and their thought has its starting point in Greek philosophy rather than religious tradition. Both were fully aware of the novelty of their undertaking and saw it as contrary to the spirit and methods of Muslim theology. Nevertheless, it is not to them that we should turn if we wish to understand what in Islamic philosophy is most original and most powerful.

Al-Kindi most of the time concerns himself either with natural philosophy and mathematics or, in practical philosophy, with ethics. His thought, like that of his contemporaries, remains tainted with elements of magic and astrology. He sensed the need to deal with the connections between philosophic science and religion, but on that subject his position comes down quite simply to stating that God can communicate His truth to men without passing through the intermediary of the human sciences. The knowledge possessed by the prophet which he conveys to ordinary mortals thus comes to him directly from God. Since it is superior to all scientific knowledge, it must be given precedence wherever the two would be in disagreement.[4]

Al-Razi, too, was interested in the natural sciences, in morality, and in a particular way in the problem which the notion of temporal creation posed for the divine immutability. Although he was no more concerned with political philosophy than was al-Kindi, he nonetheless showed less respect than the latter for the dogmas of religion. On this score his thought shows a greater affinity with ancient Epicureanism, which saw in religion only a form of deception perpetrated or entertained by civil authority to reinforce its domination of the masses.

The fragmentary state in which the work of these two masters has come down to us unfortunately does not allow us to form a definitive judgment on its significance. However, one suspects that the framework in which they developed their thought was still too narrow. By comparison with the thought of al-Farabi, their knowledge of Aristotle reveals itself to be quite defective. In logic and metaphysics they lacked the needed competence to pursue such a difficult task to its proper end, and they were unaware of all that political philosophy could entail, both from their own viewpoint and from that of the city. Moreover, neither thinker was able to give the philosophical enterprise the full breadth it called for and which is to be found for the first time in al-Farabi.

It is precisely the great merit of al-Farabi to have returned to the thought of Aristotle in its fullness, to extricate it from the confused mass of vague digressions and wild imaginings in which it was then mired, and to make it the core of his philosophizing. In conformity with the norms established long before by the masters of the great philosophical schools of late Antiquity in Alexandria and Athens, he broadened the foundations of philosophical inquiry and was the first to provide a complete account of the diverse forms of both philosophical and nonphilosophical argumentation. His commentaries on the *Organon* of Aristotle gave logic its proper place as the instrument or tool of the sciences.[5] His works on natural philosophy brought to light the foundations of Aristotelian physics and showed how, in the light of its principles, it was possible to answer the objections other thinkers sometimes tried to raise against it. His little treatise on the eternity of the world, which was a point for point refutation of the theses of John Philoponus, illustrated in brief but luminous fashion the speculative level this kind of work could attain.[6]

It is true that one still finds in him vestiges of the Neoplatonism in fashion at the time, which leads some to believe that he wore the mantle of the mystic.[7] But it is not at all certain that this is the case. Al-Farabi retained just enough of Neoplatonism as was useful to make his position acceptable to religious orthodoxy. His turn of mind seems in the end much more rational than religious or mystical. Even when he treats subjects that could easily lend themselves to a mystical interpretation, he is careful to associate himself as much as possible to Aristotle, for example, in rejecting the Neoplatonic doctrine that one ought to posit, beyond Being or Nous, an ineffable principle, the One, from which they would come forth by way of emanation. It is thus not surprising that all the great Arab philosophers who came after him—Avicenna, Avempace, Ibn Tufayl, Averroes—viewed him as their “second master” (after Aristotle) and followed his lead.

### The Platonizing Politics of al-Farabi

There nonetheless remains the curious fact, which has rarely received the full attention it deserves, that, while in logic, natural philosophy, ethics, and metaphysics, Aristotle is everywhere authoritative, in political philosophy al-Farabi and all his successors without exception turned not to him but to Plato. Al-Farabi commented on Plato’s *Republic* and *Laws.* Averroes, who wrote no less than thirty-eight commentaries on the various treatises of Aristotle, is also the author of a commentary on the *Republic.* On the other hand nowhere in the Arab tradition is any commentary on the *Politics* of Aristotle to be found.

One could, for lack of any better explanation, account for this lacuna by the fact that there was as yet no access to the text of Aristotle. That is what Averroes leaves us to believe when, at the start of his commentary on the *Republic,* he states that he did not have it at hand. It is nonetheless probable that the interest shown in Plato’s political dialogues was motivated by more profound reasons that are not without some connection to the conditions in which philosophy took root in the Muslim world.

In his treatise on *The Philosophy of Plato and Aristotle,* al-Farabi makes it known that all of his works have as their purpose to give an “account of the ways to it and of the ways to re-establish it when it becomes confused or extinct.” [8] Such an undertaking was fated to come up against daunting obstacles in a society regulated, as was Muslim society, by a divine law whose power extended to every aspect of human thought and action and which prescribed in detail all that one needed to do or believe to be happy in this life and to merit happiness in the hereafter. Whoever was attracted to philosophy, that is, to the critique of accepted opinions and the search for novel truths, was by that very fact obliged to justify himself before the tribunal of divine law. One is immediately struck by the resemblance between this situation and the one Plato had to face in an already distant time when philosophy, still young and the object of suspicion on the part of civil authorities, sought to win acceptance in fifth-century B.C. Greece.

As Avicenna observes, it is in effect Plato, and not Aristotle, who inquires into the origin of divine and human laws, the relations between them and the manner in which, by the intermediary of revelation or prophecy, the divine laws were communicated to men.[9] Plato’s most properly political—one could also say, most pious—dialogue, the *Laws,* in fact opens with a question regarding the cause or foundation of the

laws. The Stranger who has come to Crete from Athens (Socrates is named nowhere in the dialogue) asks his interlocutors, two old men belonging to ancient societies known for their good laws, whether they attribute the origin of these laws to God or to some man.[10]

Political philosophy in the Arab world was born the day it dawned on Arab thinkers that this was the kind of question their situation raised. According to al-Farabi, Plato was aware of the "grave danger" the philosopher faced in a society in which philosophy had not yet been accepted. He thus "revised" his philosophy and, without modifying its content, gave it a form that rendered it less suspect to his contemporaries.[11] It is in this, much more than its content, that his philosophy is distinct from Aristotle's. Far from opposing these two philosophies, the Arab philosophers, beginning with al-Farabi, saw no essential difference between them. They preferred Plato's politics to Aristotle's above all because it met their own needs better. Unlike the works of Aristotle, who, thanks to his predecessor's success, did not have to struggle in the same way for the freedom of philosophy, all of Plato's works are political in their mode.

It goes without saying that the religious societies of the Middle Ages gave a much more categorical answer to the question regarding the foundation of the divine laws than did the two old men whom Socrates had questioned. By that very fact, the starting point of all scientific inquiry had changed profoundly. All the more, then, was it now necessary to take into account what the divine law ordained. This is the phenomenon al-Farabi alludes to in the apologue that serves to introduce his summary of Plato's *Laws.* An ascetic renowned for his piety and integrity had incurred—for what reason we are not told—the wrath of a tyrant, who had ordered him seized. Seeking at all cost to escape, the ascetic took up the disguise of a vagabond and, pretending to be drunk, went about that night singing at the city gates. The guards soon summoned him to reveal his identity. "I am so and so," he exclaimed, "the ascetic everybody knows." Amused by this pleasantry, the sentinel let him pass without the least doubt regarding his true identity. The anecdote suggests that it is sometimes permissible to proffer dangerous truths openly, provided, of course, one does so with the necessary precautions. What the pious ascetic did is nothing other than what al-Farabi himself is doing in encasing his whole philosophy, as did Plato, in a political context.

What must be noted well is that all this entails not just a simple attempt to appeal to the works of Plato to supply what was lacking in Aristotle's *Politics,* but a genuine reworking of Aristotelian philosophy to meet the new needs that had arisen at the time. This is already evident in the way al-Farabi arranges the diverse parts of philosophy in his treatise on *The Enumeration of the Sciences,* the oldest and most complete of the accounts provided by Muslim philosophers of the nature and subdivisions of political science. In the scheme he proposes the arts of language come first, followed by logic, mathematics, physics, metaphysics, and, finally, political philosophy, to which al-Farabi joins as corollaries the specifically Islamic sciences of jurisprudence (*fiqh*) and dialectical theology (*kalam*). All of the philosophic disciplines are in this way assigned places in a framework that is both political and theological. They are part of a larger whole whose chief aim is to illumine the specific character of the religious community and, should the need arise, to foster its reform in a way that is congenial to the interests of the philosopher and the role he might play in it.

Consequently, for al-Farabi practical philosophy is no longer reduced, as it was for his predecessors, to ethics. It takes on the character of a methodical reflection on human happiness and the way it is attained within the city or nation. Actual cities and their organization cease to appear as a raw datum and become themselves the object of a scientific study that seeks to lay bare their nature and foundation. Since men cannot be happy unless they are well governed, the new political philosophy has as its central theme the perfect social order or, to borrow the title of one of al-Farabi's major works, "the virtuous city." It analyzes its constitutive elements, among which a place of honor is accorded to prophecy or religious legislation. Along the way, it inquires into the conditions favorable to the spread of religion and into the obstacles that are forever confronting it and the dangers that threaten it from within. It focuses especially on the founder of the religious community, on the virtues he as well as those who will succeed him must possess, and on a host of related problems about which Aristotle's *Politics* has nothing to say.[12]

The same concerns led al-Farabi to interpret the connections between philosophical knowledge and divine revelation in a way that was more nuanced and better adapted to the needs of his cause. The key text in this matter, the first part of *The Philosophy of Plato and Aristotle,* presents religion as nothing more or less than an image or reflection of philosophy. It constitutes the means par excellence of which the statesman disposes to instruct the multitude. To acquit himself of this task, he needs to have, along with wisdom, the requisite gifts of imagination to persuade his subjects that the laws he promulgates are well founded. In his person the qualities of prophet, philosopher, and prince or *imam* are joined and raised to a superior degree of perfection. The harmony that seemed to be lacking between wisdom and religious belief is thus

reestablished, even if the processes by which they are communicated—demonstrative reasoning on the one hand, persuasive discourse and sensible imagery on the other—remain distinct.[13]

This way of seeing things obviously had great advantages. It allowed al-Farabi to safeguard the primacy of reason by showing, against al-Kindi, that the philosopher also has access to the highest truths and to afford the philosopher a more cordial welcome among his coreligionists by reminding him, against al-Razi, that in his speech he should avoid all that could hurt others' sensibilities regarding the dignity accorded to divine revelation. In short, al-Farabi postulates the identities of the prophet-founder and the philosopher-king less because he believes in them than because he could thereby justify in the eyes of the believer the place he claims for philosophy in a society which, by virtue of its origin and specific character, would only feel distrust or antipathy toward it.[14]

## Maimonides and Political Philosophy in Judaism

What has just been said concerning the philosophy of al-Farabi applies equally, taking into account its specific modalities, to Jewish philosophy, which, from its first appearance in the twelfth century, took its inspiration from Arab philosophy and borrowed its essential traits. Chapter 17 of Book I of Maimonides's *Guide of the Perplexed* retraces, somewhat in the way al-Farabi had done, the story of the transmission of ancient wisdom from the Greeks to the Arabs and Andalusians. The author's design appears to be very conservative, for it is only a matter of temporarily returning to an oral tradition the memory of which had little by little waned and almost completely disappeared. Yet by his interest in "the books of the philosophers" and by committing to writing what he understood of them, Maimonides infringes on the precept prohibiting the reading and publication of all books save those of the Law. His only defense consists in saying that such an undertaking had become necessary because of the weakening of the ancient oral tradition.[15] The route he chooses is situated somewhat midway between "impossible obedience" and "flagrant transgression."[16]

As for political science, it seems at first view that Maimonides shows little concern for it. He speaks of it only rarely in the *Guide* and devotes only a few lines to it near the end of his *Logic*. Moreover, he states clearly that in the religious community the Law or Torah takes the place of political science, which by that very fact becomes superfluous.[17] If one takes into account only his explicit statements, one would not expect this science to play much of a role in his thought. But that is still only a first impression. It may be that the pious Jew has no questions to raise on the subject of the religious law. Since he believes it to be perfect, he can accept it as such, without any further inquiry into the motives of his adherence. But such is not the case with Maimonides. As a philosopher, he finds it difficult to trust what others would have to say regarding this law. He needs to understand its worth and thus himself raise the question of its raison-d'être and the conditions of its operation.[18] Yet the law, however one views it, is above all a political phenomenon. To grasp its nature it is necessary to have recourse to that human science to which its proper study belongs, that is, political science. By this detour, politics for Maimonides once again attains an importance that no one could have foreseen.

But to what political philosophy does Maimonides have recourse? We will not be surprised to learn that again it is the Platonizing politics of al-Farabi. With the exception of Aristotle, the author he praises most is neither Avicenna, about whom he speaks at times rather harshly,[19] nor his contemporary Averroes, but al-Farabi.[20] The use he makes of him in all of his works reveals how much he allowed himself to be influenced by him, not only on this or that point of doctrine, but in his manner of handling the altogether important problem of the connections between philosophy and revealed religion. Prophecy becomes for him, as it was for al-Farabi, one of the major themes of political science. Like al-Farabi, he insists on the importance of the imagination in the exercise of the prophetic function, on the role of the founder of the religious city, and on the identity of the philosopher, king, prophet, and legislator[21] to the point that one wrote that he "would not have considered sufficiently instructed to understand the *Guide* anyone who did not know Farabi, and especially his treatise on political governments."[22]

The same would have to be said of the remarks devoted to political science in his *Logic,* which are a sort of appendage to the famous text on *The Philosophy of Plato and Aristotle* and which, like it, claim for political philosophy the right to judge even divine things. If Maimonides appears in general more moderate than his master and attenuates some of his theses, it is less, it seems, because of theoretical reasons than because of consideration of the demands of a religious law more hostile to philosophical speculation than was Islam.[23]

Maimonides's corpus is obviously too complex for us to consider all of its aspects, but perhaps it is not necessary to do so. We will become sufficiently aware of his political orientation if we consider briefly the problem of the nature and social role of prophecy as set forth in the *Guide*.

Should prophecy be considered as a human phenomenon, due only to the prophet's own initiative, or is it of a properly divine essence? Formulated in this way, the question was already ancient. The Greek philosophers had articulated its main elements when they were concerned with knowing whether dreams and visions came from the gods or were to be attributed to natural causes. Opinions were divided. Democritus reduced them to images provoked by external objects, such as statues of the gods.[24] This early explanation seemed inadequate, in part because it skirts the problem of the genuine dream or the prediction that comes true. Aristotle, who discusses the matter in his *De divinatione per somnium,* notes however that these outcomes could be only mere coincidences.[25] This would dispense one from believing that such dreams are "inspired by the gods" (*theopempta*), especially since it is not the best or "the most intelligent" who enjoy them, but ordinary people, who moreover are by temperament loquacious or excitable. Thus Aristotle does not find it strange that they usually occur during sleep, which gives free rein to the imagination by removing it from reason's control.[26]

Although Aristotle's theory is more complete than that of Democritus, it remains nonetheless purely natural. It was not accepted by the Stoics, who had no doubts regarding the divine character of divinatory phenomena. In their benevolence toward men and in order to encourage them or make them more prudent, the gods do not fail to inform them of the future and to show them the ways that lead to understanding their signs. In fact, if divination is inconceivable without the gods, the gods themselves are inconceivable without divination.[27] This kind of divination is not a matter of either art or science. It is thus not to be confused with the divination of wise men, which is grounded in their knowledge of nature in order to predict solar eclipses, earthquakes, and other occurrences of this kind. Since it is of divine origin, it belongs only to prophets (*vatibus*) or to those who are asleep (*dormientibus*), and ordinarily manifests itself only when their souls are free of all cares.[28]

If one could choose between one and the other of these two opinions, one could also attempt to reconcile them. This is a bit of what Cratippus had already done when he denied that prophetic dreams were matters of coincidence, without rejecting that they could be explained by natural or psychological causes. Since the superior part of the soul is allied to the divinity and is always in close ties with it, it is not impossible for it to predict the future thanks to certain gifts it possesses by its very nature. It matters little if at times it is led astray by the senses and its predictions turn out to be false. The fact is they would never be accurate if there were not in it some force capable of fulfilling this function. We do not deny the existence of the eyes simply because they succumb to optical illusions from time to time. The upshot is that divination is no less divine for being human, nor less human for being divine.[29]

The question was taken up again in analogous terms by the Muslim philosophers when they had to account for the new phenomenon of revelation or prophecy. They took their inspiration especially from Aristotle's De *divinatione,* which they knew only in an Arabic version that is no longer extant and according to which a prophetic dream comes from God through the intermediary of the agent intellect and requires the cooperation of divine and human causes. This was the position of Avicenna, among others. Between the prophetic dream and prophecy there is only a difference of degree. They are identical and differ only in that the prophetic dream concerns only things to come, whereas prophecy also extends to all forms of theoretical knowledge. This is also the position of Maimonides,[30] who begins by enumerating the three opinions that at the time were current on this matter: that of the pagans and Jews, who believe that God can confer the gift of prophecy on anyone, whether wise or not, on the sole condition that he possess the requisite moral dispositions; that of the philosophers, who maintain that a man who possesses all of the intellectual and moral qualities of which human nature is capable is necessarily a prophet; and lastly, that of Jewish Law, which is identical with the second, except that it grants the title of prophet only to one whom God has chosen. Moreover, the one chosen is always an individual who is disposed by nature to prophetic activity and has undergone the proper preparation: "It is our fundamental principle that there must be training and perfection, whereupon the possibility arises to which the power of the deity becomes attached." [31]

What are these dispositions? In the first place is intelligence, which allows one to grasp the loftiest truths. But since those to whom he must impart this knowledge are often less endowed than he is, he cannot do without those gifts of the imagination that make it possible for him to come down to their level and communicate with them in a language they can understand. Moreover he should be distinguished by his conduct and thus disdain bodily pleasures as well as vain honors. All prophets do not possess these qualities to the same degree, but they are all equally necessary, such that one would not take to be a prophet a philosopher who did not join imagination to intelligence or a man endowed with a powerful imagination who is not subject to the guidance of reason.[32]

It follows from all of this that there is no airtight partition separating the divine world from the order of nature. Divine wisdom is spread in a continuum from one end of the universe to the other, reaching each being according to its degree of natural perfection. Accordingly prophecy is transmitted by the intermediary of the agent intellect to reason and thence to the imagination, from which it receives the precise form under which most people will be able to assimilate it.[33]

The exposition ends in typical fashion with a discussion of what might properly be called the prophet's sociopolitical role. Like Aristotle, Maimonides recognizes that men are made to live in society but that their natural diversity often poses an obstacle to their unity. This unity can only be restored if a "conventional accord" intervenes to prescribe a common way of life and to reprimand the excesses to which men are inclined in one way or another. In this way "the Law, although it is not natural, enters into what is natural."[34] Accordingly divine wisdom sees to it that the human species is always provided with a certain number of individuals who are more particularly endowed to govern. At the head of these we find the prophet-legislator, to whom the nature of the political regime has been revealed and who is concerned to communicate the truth to others under the form of images and parables. There is then all the more reason to insist on the mimetic function of the imagination, which was of such great interest to the Arab philosophers and to which Maimonides attaches no less importance.

Nothing is more instructive than to compare on this score the thought of Maimonides with that of St. Thomas Aquinas, who makes frequent reference to the *Guide* but does not follow it on any of these points. It will become immediately evident why he does not do so once we recall that Thomas distinguishes much more clearly than Maimonides does between the order of grace and the order of nature. When he speaks of prophecy in the strict sense, he affirms that it belongs only to the first of these two orders.[35] He has nothing to say regarding the explanation that had been given of the prophetic dream or of natural prophecy, which can be understood by the influence of heavenly bodies on the imagination, for these bodies contain in them the seeds of events of which they are the cause.[36] However, contrary to what Maimonides and his predecessors had taught, such prophecies are not to be placed on the same footing as divine prophecy. As a "gift from God" or "gift of the Holy Spirit," the latter in no way depends on the prophet's natural dispositions and in itself requires no intellectual or moral preparation on his part.[37] Nor can it any more be maintained that it constitutes the object of a habitus or permanent disposition.[38] To be sure, its content is intelligible and it is often transmitted by means of sensible images. To grasp it and express it, the prophet must consequently make use of all of his faculties.[39] However, these are not its defining properties. God can make use of any human instrument whatever, however poorly endowed by nature. If he does not have the requisite intelligence and imagination, God himself will supply them and thus His power will only be all the more manifest. It is thus not wrong to say that Thomas returns to the first of the three opinions cited by Maimonides, which he took over without taking anything away from it.

As for the sociopolitical role that Maimonides and his masters attributed to prophecy, Thomas has nothing to do with it, a fact that sets him apart from the entire Muslim and Jewish tradition.[40] The justice on which the political order depends is sufficiently known by the first principles of natural reason, without there being any need to add anything to them. Prophecy itself is solely the principle of the "justice of faith," *justitia fidei,* which ordains us to the happiness of eternal life.[41] God did not bestow it on us in order to resolve the problems of organization that arise within every human group, and its object is not to instruct us on how the ideal city might be constituted.

It should be noted in closing that Maimonides develops this theory of the imagination only in his scientific treatises. Among the qualities the prophet must cultivate, his popular writings mention only science and moral perfection. Maimonides was dealing with a delicate issue. Since the imagination's chief function is to veil the truth, it was no doubt better to say nothing of it to those who were to benefit from this sort of disguise.

The connections that al-Farabi and Maimonides made between philosophical and religious thought were not in principle meant to lead to a true synthesis. It was never for them a question of letting philosophy penetrate to the interior of the theological tradition by turning the stranger into a fully accredited citizen of the religious community. The philosopher, always more or less on the fringes of society, will continue to lead a precarious existence, and his influence, to the extent he has any, will be exercised most often from the outside. A very clear line of demarcation separates his thought from that of believers or of nonphilosophers. The situation would be altogether different in Christianity, in which, as we shall see, philosophy became much more closely integrated into theological speculation, without, however, putting an end once and for all to the tension that could exist between the two.

## Notes

1 This fragment was published together with a German translation by M. Steinschneider, *Al-Farabi (Alpharabicus) des arabischen Philosophen Leben und Schriften* (St. Petersburg, 1869), 85–89. For an overview of Muslim thought, see Muhsin Mahdi, "Islamic Theology and Philosophy," in *Encyclopaedia Britannica,* 15th edition, IX (New York, 1974) 1012–1025.

2 See al-Farabi, *On the Appearance of Philosophy*:

> Things went along thus until Christianity came. Then the instruction was stopped at Rome, but remained at Alexandria until the Christian king looked into the matter and assembled the bishops to deliberate about what should be left alone in this instruction and what should be stopped. They were of the opinion that there should be instruction in the books of logic up to the categorical figures and that there be no instruction in what comes after that. The reason for this is that they were of the opinion that in this [latter part of logic] there was no harm for Christianity, but that in what they admitted for instruction there was something helpful toward the victory of their religion. Consequently, the public [exoteric] part of the instruction remained within this prescribed limit, and whatever was examined of the rest was studied privately, until Islam came a long time afterwards. . . . That which was taught [in logic] at that time was up to the end of the categorical figures [of the syllogism]. (Unpublished English translation by Muhsin Mahdi)

3 See al-Farabi, *On the Appearance*:

> But Abu Nasr Al-Farabi says about himself that he studied with Yuhanna ibn Hailan up to the end of the *Posterior Analytics.* The part [of the *Analytics*] which comes after the categorical figures [of the syllogism] was called "the part which is not read" [i.e., in the lecture curriculum], until [the time when] one read that; for it became standard [in the study of logic] afterwards. When the matter came to Muslim teachers, one read from the categorical figures as far as man was able to read. And thus Abu Nasr [al-Farabi] says that he himself read [i.e., under a teacher] up to the end of the *Posterior Analytics.* (Trans. Mahdi)

4 See Alfred L. Ivry, *Al-Kindi's Metaphysics* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1974), 22–34. For a comparison between al-Kindi and al-Farabi, see R. Walzer, "The Rise of Islamic Philosophy," *Oriens* 3 (1950): 1–19.

5 On the repercussions of the appearance of the new logic, see M. Mahdi, "Language and Logic in Classical Islam," in *Logic in Classical Islamic Culture,* ed. G. E. von Grunebaum (Wiesbaden: O. Harrassowitz, 1970), 51–83.

6 See the English translation and commentary by M. Mahdi, "al-Farabi against Philoponos," *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 26, no. 4 (1967): 233–260.

7 See the remarks of Étienne Gilson:

> That great logician was also a profoundly religious spirit, and it is at least probable that this same sentiment inspired his epoch-making distinction of essence and existence in created things. It marks a date in the history of metaphysics. Al-Farabi, as M. Horton so aptly remarks, showed himself capable of adapting the overwhelming richness of Greek philosophical speculation to the nostalgic feeling for God that the Orientals have, and to his own mystical experience. Indeed, he was himself a mystic, a sufi. (*History of Christian Philosophy in the Middle Ages* [New York: Random House, 1955], 185)

8 *Al-Farabi's Philosophy of Plato and Aristotle* 1, 4, 63, trans. M. Mahdi (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1969), 49–50. Subsequent citations from this text are from this translation.

9 See Avicenna, "On the Divisions of the Rational Sciences," in *Medieval Political Philosophy: A Sourcebook,* ed. R. Lerner and M. Mahdi (New York: Free Press, 1963), 96–97.

10 See Plato, *Laws* I, 624a; and Leo Strauss, *The Argument and the Action of Plato's Laws* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975), 1–4.

11 *Al-Farabi's Plato and Aristotle* II, 10, 36.

12 For an overview of al-Farabi's political ideas, see M. Mahdi, "al-Farabi," in *History of Political Philosophy,* ed. L. Strauss and J. Cropsey (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972), 182–202.

13 *Al-Farabi's Plato and Aristotle* I, 44, 55–59. On this first part of al-Farabi's treatise, titled "The Attainment of Happiness," see M. Mahdi, "Remarks on al-Farabi's 'Attainment of Happiness,'" in *Essays in Islamic Philosophy and Science,* ed. G. F. Hourani (Albany: SUNY Press, 1975), 47–66.

14 On the significance of the identification of the philosopher and the legislator, see Leo Strauss, "Farabi's Plato," in *Louis Ginzberg Jubilee Volume* (New York: American Academy of Jewish Research, 1945), 363–385.

15 On this question, see also Maimonides, *The Guide of the Perplexed,* trans. Shlomo Pines (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), Book III, introduction.

16 Leo Strauss, "The Literary Character of *The Guide of the Perplexed*," in *Persecution,* 52.

17 See Maimonides, "Logic, ch. 14," in *Medieval Political Philosophy,* 190. See also *Guide* III, 27–28, 51.

18 See *Guide* I, 33; and III, 25–50.

19 See Maimonides, *Guide,* translator's introduction, xciii.

20 See Maimonides, "Letter to Ibn Thibbon," ed. A. Marx, *Jewish Quarterly Review* N.S. 25 (1934–1935): 378–380, in which al-Farabi's treatise on *Political Regimes* is referred to as "finest wheat."

21 See especially *Guide* II, 32–48; and III, 27–28.

22 Leo Strauss, "Some Remarks on the Political Science of Maimonides and Farabi," trans. Robert Bartlett, *Interpretation* 18, no. 1 (fall, 1990): 15.

23 See Maimonides, *Guide,* translator's introduction, lxxxvi, xcii.

24 See Diels, *The Pre-Socratic Philosophers,* fragment A77; and Plutarch, *Quaest. conv.* VIII, 10, 2. On Democritus's theory, see W. Jaeger, *The Theology of the Early Greek Philosophers,* trans. Edward S. Robinson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1947), 180–181.

25 See Aristotle, *De divinatione per somnium* I, 462b28, 463b1; and II, 464a5.

26 See Aristotle, *De divinatione* II, 463b12–23, 464a11ff.

27 See Aristotle, *De divinatione* I, 38, 82–83; and II, 49, 101.

28 See Aristotle, *De divinatione* I, 50, 113.

29 See Aristotle, *De divinatione* I, 32, 70; II, 52, 107, and 58, 119.

30 See Maimonides, *Guide* II, 36 (78b).

31 See Maimonides, *Guide* II, 32 (74a).

32 See Maimonides, *Guide* II, 37, 38.

33 See Maimonides, *Guide* II, 38 (83a–84b).

34 See Maimonides, *Guide* II, 40 (86a).

35 See Thomas Aquinas, *On Truth,* q. 12, art. 3; and *Summa Theologiae,* II-II, q. 172, art. 1.

36 See Thomas Aquinas, *On Truth,* q. 12, art. 3, ad 5 and ad 7.

37 "It is clear, then, that natural prophecy requires the proper disposition of the natural constitution, but the prophecy which is the gift of the Holy Spirit does not need this. However, it does require that the natural disposition which is suitable for prophecy be given with the gift of prophecy." Thomas Aquinas, *Disputed Questions on Truth,* q. 12, art. 4, trans. James V. McGlynn (Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1953), 127. See also *Summa Theologiae,* II-II, q. 172, art. 3.

38 See Thomas Aquinas, *On Truth,* q. 12, art. 1; and *Summa Theologiae,* II-II, q. 171, art. 2.

39 See Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae,* II-II, q. 174, art. 2, ad 2.

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> St. Thomas' silence on the political function of prophecy—to be more precise: his denial of such a function—set him apart from the entire school of thought, Islamic and Jewish, that ranged itself with the Platonic search for the 'ideal city' on earth. In developing that tradition, the *falasifa* and their Jewish partisans, including Maimonides, had good reason for stressing the role of imagination in prophecy. It was the political function of the prophet that necessitated the veiling of metaphysical notions by figuration. By radically ignoring the political aspect, St. Thomas deprived himself of the means of suggesting a cogent rationale for the significance of the imaginative element in prophecy. On the one hand, he fully subscribed to the interpretation of the prophetic act as one involving the imagination. On the other, he had little to offer in explanation of this theory beyond the general observation that truth was hard of access to the multitude. (A. Altmann, "Maimonides and Thomas Aquinas: Natural or Divine Prophecy," *Association for Jewish Studies Review* 3 (1978): 18)

41

> The society of men, insofar as it is ordained to eternal life as its end, can be preserved only through the justice of faith, of which prophecy is the source. . . . But, since this end is supernatural, the justice, which is ordained to this end, and the prophecy, which is its source, will both be supernatural. But the justice through which human society is ruled in its ordination to the civil good can be had adequately through natural principles implanted in man. Hence, it is not necessary for prophecy to be natural. (See Thomas Aquinas, *Disputed Questions on Truth,* q. 12, art. 3, ad 11, trans. McGlynn, 122–123)

# CHAPTER THREE

## *Political Philosophy in the Christian World*

### The Crisis of the Thirteenth Century

A phenomenon analogous to the one we have just studied among Islamic and Jewish philosophers was soon to take place in Christendom under the impetus of an event of crucial importance for the evolution of Western thought: the diffusion of the works of Aristotle, often through the intermediary of Arab philosophers, in the thirteenth century. With the arrival of Aristotle the Latins discovered more than a new philosophy that they would gradually assimilate and which would eventually replace the Platonism that had come to them from the Fathers of the Church. It is not unreasonable to say that they discovered philosophy *tout court.*[1]

From almost the earliest times the Christian world had been more hospitable toward philosophy than were Islam and Judaism. Unlike these two religions, Christianity comes across in the first place more as a faith or sacred doctrine than as a law. Since it was not bound to any specific political or social system, Christianity found itself less directly threatened by the backlash of scientific ideas current in pagan circles. Between revealed faith and philosophic speculation a tacit accord had gradually been established in the course of the early centuries which had allowed theologians to make use of the methods and teachings of Greco-Roman philosophy in elaborating Christian dogma. Therein lies no doubt the principal reason why philosophy could take root in Christian civilization and maintain itself there, whereas in the Islamic world, if it did not disappear as abruptly and completely after the death of Averroes as Renan would have it, philosophy at least underwent a series of transformations that rendered it in great part unrecognizable. [2]

Nonetheless, the philosophy which the medieval theologians inherited from their predecessors was a philosophy already purged in some way and retooled to conform to the demands of Christian dogma. In order to appreciate this, it is enough to recall the commonplaces employed by the Church Fathers to explain in what sense this “wisdom from abroad,” as they called it, had at last yielded to revelation and was compelled to submit to it.[3] Saint Jerome and Sidonius Apollinaris compare philosophy to the captive that the Deuteronomic legislation allowed the Israelites to wed provided she submitted to a number of precise conditions that elementary prudence seemed to dictate.[4] The foreigner who had been obtained as the spoil of war had to shed her garments and ornaments, shave her head, cut her nails to the bone, and wear mourning for a full month. If at the end of this period she had lost none of her attraction, the marriage could take place. There was no longer any reason to fear the consequences of a disparity that, absent such precautions, could have brought misfortune.

Once pagan philosophy had been subjected to a similar treatment, it became very useful to Christian faith both in itself and in its rapport to the secular sciences. Philosophy led to a more adequate understanding of the revealed mysteries. It offered the faithful a means to resolve the Bible’s apparent contradictions or the difficulties raised by the discrepancies that emerged at times between its teaching and what human reason taught. It allowed Christians to come into contact with the intellectual elite of paganism by providing a common basis for discussion. It likewise made them able to combat their adversaries with equal arms, just as the young David did when he seized the sword of Goliath and used it to sever the giant’s head.[5] In a treatise that was widely read in the Middle Ages, the *De doctrina christiana,* St. Augustine had already established a complete program of studies whose purpose it was to show how the human disciplines could be placed at the service of “sound teaching” in order to facilitate its understanding and development. [6]

The distance in time which separates us from these events does not always make it easy for us to perceive what was at stake in the millennial debate that seized the attention, mobilized the energies, and challenged the ingenuity of the most eminent and capable minds. What was there in this pagan thought against which Christians of the past were often vehemently opposed but from which they nonetheless succeeded in extracting what in their eyes it contained that was of abiding worth? Historical science to date has shed but

a feeble light on the root of the problem. Accustomed from long ago as we are to a Christian reading of classical authors, we readily attribute to them all sorts of truths to which they never subscribed and impute to them all sorts of errors which they were very careful to avoid.

St. Basil's "Address to Young Men" on the proper way to derive benefit from Greek literature can teach us some astonishing lessons on this score provided we are willing to read it attentively and without harboring any illusions about the author's apologetic intentions. Basil's address is all the more interesting in that he does not limit himself to a mere articulation of the principles that should guide a young Christian in his readings, but painstakingly demonstrates thorough numerous quotations taken from the pagan authors themselves how these writers could contribute to a young believer's intellectual and moral formation. The reader, naturally inclined to entrust himself to Basil, thinks that he has before him the very words of the authors from whom the quotations are said to be taken. Yet, remarkably, the majority of these citations have been falsified and thus made to conform to what a Christian could hope to find in support of his own beliefs.[7] The result is that the whole of pagan thought comes to testify in favor of revealed truth. It is not surprising that under such conditions old anxieties were gradually appeased. To anyone who did not know music, the two instruments of faith and reason ended up playing the same tune.

But it was far from so when the new Aristotle suddenly irrupted in the Latin world. For the first time one was in the presence of an unregenerate pagan whose features did not always resemble those to which people were long accustomed. This authentically pagan thought that the Christians had long before graciously bestowed on their Muslim students and recent translations of the *Politics* had made complete had returned after a long journey and in new circumstances. It was to throw men's minds into disarray and precipitate a crisis which in one sense medieval Christendom never overcame.

## The Condemnation of 1277

This is not the place to rehearse the oft-told story of the inroads made by Aristotle in the West and of the various measures taken by Church authority to stay his advance.[8] From the point of view that concerns us here, the event with the greatest consequences is without doubt the condemnation of 1277, by which the bishop of Paris, Etienne Tempier, attempted to resolve the conflict that had been growing over the past several years.[9] It has often been noted that, in spite of its local character and the rather mysterious circumstances surrounding it, Tempier's intervention marked a turning point in the history of medieval thought in a number of ways.[10] There is no doubt that it furnished new weapons to the defenders of a more traditional type of theology of Augustinian inspiration that would soon evolve in the direction of Nominalism. Some historians have thought to find the starting point of modern science in some of the theses denounced by Tempier or in the mentality they reflected.[11] One might equally think it was in reaction against this same mentality that there arose the mystical currents that began to appear soon afterwards in Meister Eckhart and his disciples in the Rhineland. But Tempier's condemnation was to have other effects as well. As far as we can judge, it was his condemnation that gave to political philosophy as we have defined it the impetus it had awaited in the Christian West.

Modem scholarship has at times been harsh on Tempier, especially since his zeal for the faith led him to proscribe as heretical a number of doctrines taught by St. Thomas Aquinas, whose orthodoxy would be universally acknowledged a few years later.[12] Whatever has been said about the matter, it is not certain that Tempier and the theologians in his circle saw less clearly into this question than the majority of modern scholars whose impartiality is not always above reproach. We do not know in every instance the source of the condemned propositions or whether they were all extracted textually from the ransacked texts, but the fact is that taken together they contain nothing that is very obscure and especially nothing that is very Christian.

Let us leave aside those few propositions whose tenor directly attacked certain specific dogmas. Proposition 195, for example, states that God would not have the power to produce a man without passing through the intermediary of a proper cause, that is, another man,[13] and Propositions 196 to 199 maintain that an accident cannot exist outside its subject.[14] One cannot grant these theses without calling into question the mysteries of the Incarnation and the Eucharist. This was enough to make any theologian uneasy.

One has only to peruse Tempier's syllabus to see that it is not just a series of attacks against one or another particular truth and even less a mere quarrel among theologians of different schools, but a philosophical stance that threatened the whole of Christian dogma and went so far as to deny the possibility of revelation. The common bond among a great many of these propositions emerges clearly once we extract from them the three fundamental questions on which the religious tradition and recently rediscovered

Aristotelianism clashed during the Middle Ages: the creation of the world, divine knowledge, and the immortality of the soul.[15] These questions, of course, were already ancient, part of the theological baggage going back to the Fathers of the Church, but they took on a new urgency by the fact that it was now possible to answer them in a way that differed totally from the biblical tradition.

To affirm that God is creator is to maintain in principle that He is not pure intellect or "thought thinking itself," as Aristotle put it,[16] but a being endowed with a free will and who is consequently the efficient cause no less than the final cause of the universe. Such a conception has enormous ramifications from both a speculative and a practical point of view. It has a profound effect on the idea one has of the origin of the world and the nature of divinity. It was not only a question of knowing whether or not the visible world had always existed. St. Thomas and others before him had taught that in itself the notion of an eternal creation is not repugnant to reason and that the noneternity of the world was known to us only through revelation.[17] In both cases, however, the divine attributes remained the same. A God who is eternally creator is no less a God who acts *ad extra* and who consequently is no longer defined simply by His wisdom but by His omnipotence. Therein lay the bone of contention. In the *Topics* Aristotle seems to treat the eternity of the material world as an insoluble problem,[18] but in other texts, the *De Caelo* for example, there is no doubt as to what his position is.[19] In any event, there is never any question in Aristotle of a creation *ex nihilo* similar to what Christian theology defended, since the elements of which bodies are formed are always taken to be eternal.[20] By having all things depend on a free act of the divine will, one introduces a rift in the heart of being that human reason can never overcome completely.[21] The fundamental intelligibility of the universe, upon which Aristotelian philosophy staked its claim, was jeopardized by the inexplicable decision God would have taken to produce beings outside Himself.

The distance separating the religious and philosophical traditions appears no less great when it comes to the question of divine knowledge. A God who has no other knowledge than of Himself knows nothing of what goes on outside Himself. If this is so, one can no longer speak of any particular providence. [22] There is providence in the broad sense, if one wishes, to the extent that the universe is perfect, that is, in the measure that it possesses all it needs to attain its end or return to its principle. This condition will be fulfilled if, among the beings that constitute the world, there exists a species endowed with intelligence and thus capable of understanding both the whole of which it is the most important part as well as all the other species that are necessary to the subsistence of this intelligent being.[23] Al-Farabi and Maimonides said this in their own own way when they asserted that providence is nothing else than the possibility man has to acquire the speculative virtues and attain the perfection of his intellect.[24] Everything in the end is ordered to the good of the intellect, although the intellect is fully developed only in certain privileged individuals who by that very fact become the measure of all things. It goes without saying that this is no longer providence as understood by revealed religion, according to which God is not content to draw all things to Himself in the manner of a final cause but provides every rational creature with all that it individually needs to attain its proper end.[25]

Finally, a God that has no knowledge whatever of what goes on in this world is also not a God who rewards the good and punishes the wicked in the world beyond. Left to itself, human reason knows nothing with certainty of this other life revelation speaks of and has a great difficulty conceiving how the soul, once it is separated from the body, could act or even subsist in its individuality.[26] Aristotle had practically nothing to say on these questions that were essential to the Christian vision of the world. St. Thomas rightly observes on this score that the *Nicomachean Ethics* only discusses happiness in "this life."[27] One ought to add, following al-Farabi, that it discusses the matter as if there were no other life.[28] Such complete silence on all that regards the personal survival of the human soul was not of the kind to reassure a properly religious mind.

Once these central theses are recognized, one can easily grasp the connections among apparently disparate questions which several other propositions deal with, questions such as prayer, the possibility of miracles, the primacy of the speculative life, the nature of theology, and the Christian virtues. Prayer obviously holds no meaning unless God is there to hear it and to grant it if He deems it appropriate to do so.[29] Miracles also presuppose the possibility of a divine intervention that is ruled out from the start by the idea of a God who concerns himself only with himself.[30] Likewise it is altogether comprehensible that the anonymous authors of these propositions would have held that theology teaches us nothing new,[31] seeing that it seemed to be for them but an image of philosophy for the benefit of the mass of people. According to them theology's sole legitimate function is to present under the form of myth certain salutary truths which it belongs to the civil authority to employ judiciously. Theology's only justification is its usefulness and the precise form it takes in any given period can be explained solely by historical contingencies that usually escape human control.[32] The philosopher is thus the only one to possess wisdom or to aspire toward it.[33]

Since he bows only to what his own reason allows him to accept, there is no place in his soul for the Christian virtue of humility.[34]

We feel obliged to note how much the thought of Aristotle became constricted at the hands of his new interpreters. Later thinkers would acknowledge that fidelity to his principles in no way entailed such a radical position. A true philosopher is generally less certain of himself, and his investigations rarely lead to such categorical assertions or denials. What marks him most deeply is not his assent or opposition to any particular teaching, whether or not it accords with revealed truth, but much more his unconditional choice of reason as the one and only standard of truth. Yet, even when stated in these terms, the problem is far from being fully resolved. Either natural reason stands supreme or it does not. Since an intermediary solution is not possible, in the last analysis one must choose one or the other of these two positions. To reason thus, however, is already to grant philosophy a dignity that theology could not give it, for whoever asks seriously if reason is superior to faith or vice versa anticipates an answer that only reason is in a position to provide. The question itself shows that the philosopher has already left the circle which encloses the believer. One way or another, the whole of Christian civilization was undermined, not by a simple negation, which would not have meant much, but by arguments that could reasonably be attributed to a philosopher whose authority was challenged less and less and whose works had come to symbolize the most perfect attainment of human reason without the aid of revelation. St. Bonaventure was on the mark when he denounced this kind of philosophy as nothing other than the tree of the knowledge of good and evil which could not be eaten of without losing one's faith.[35] This was no less the case with St. Thomas, even though he did not employ the same language and methods.

## The Return to Nature

There is no need to examine these condemned propositions any further. To get at the root of the debate, it is enough to return to the text of the condemnation and to note also the genre of the works Tempier sought to attack. Two among them are designated by their opening words: the De Amore of Andreas Capellanus[36] and a treatise dealing with the new "science" linked to astrology that came from Arab lands and in the Middle Ages was known as geomancy.[37] In addition, Tempier's decree alludes, without identifying them, to several treatises dealing with sorcery, necromancy, divinations, and various other forms of magic.[38] Even though they may contain fraudulent material, all of these works have something in common that can be summarized in one word: Nature.

No one will deny that this is the case with the *De Amore.* If any sentiment deserves to be called natural, it is love. Admittedly it is not easy to determine the author's intention. He alerts the reader to the fact that the subject has been treated with finesse and precision—"*subtiliter et fideliter*"[39]—and that his words require "an attentive ear"[40] if they are to be understood properly. He points out the discrepancy between the two parts of his exposition: the first of which praises love, whereas the second, briefer part urges its rejection.[41] Both parts are nevertheless indispensable; the reader must choose between them or reconcile them if he can. He asserts at the beginning that love "imitates nature itself"[42] and thereby transcends the conventions that are everywhere in force among men. These conventions are obviously necessary for human community. It is normal for civil authorities to attach the greatest importance to them and instinctively to oppose all that could unmask their always somewhat artificial character. Yet if society's interest lies in ignoring or forgetting the distinction between "nature" and "convention," this is not the case with love and the more so with that higher form of love which is love of wisdom or philosophy. Philosophy's concern is precisely to uncover, beneath the web of officially sanctioned opinions which defines a particular society's way of life, the principle that exists independently of any human will and which from the beginning has been called nature.

As for geomancy, it is doubtless more worthy of credence than its close neighbors pyromancy, hyrdomancy, or aeromancy,[43] to say nothing of the vast repertory of more or less bizarre procedures that people have always used to predict the future. One has to be credulous indeed to boast of achieving knowledge of future contingents by means of haphazard markings inscribed in sand and connected with the constellations that are supposed to determine the course of events.[44] Such a widespread and tenacious phenonemon can only be explained by certain tendencies inherent in the human mind and susceptible of nearly infinite manifestations. It can be expected that the mind will be taken up with superstition or the remains of an outmoded religion, but we probably would not give these attempts the name of occult "science" if we did not sense in them some aspiration comparable to the one that motivates scientific investigation. They too assume the existence of a world ordered not entirely by chance but by well-determined laws that man would want to know and that he too often strives to manipulate according to his own wish. In this they bear witness to a barely conscious search for the principles on which science rests;

hence one might see in them a kind of popular or infantile substitute for philosophy. Nature, though still ill conceived, is already playing a preponderant role.

### The Conflict between Faith and Reason

Medieval thinkers had been lacking knowledge of nature as human reason can discover it, not as it appears to the eyes of faith. It is just this knowledge that would overturn everything.[45] It was no longer evident to everyone that reasoning from the principles of reason always led to conclusions that were in conformity with the data of revelation. Beyond that, once nature was emancipated and accepted as an autonomous criterion, did it not run the risk of becoming in its turn the supreme tribunal before which theology itself would have to appear?

Such was the impasse into which Siger of Brabant and Boethius of Dacia, the two principal authors Tempier's condemnation had in view, had gotten themselves. Some historians have sought to see in Siger and Boethius the first defenders of the rights of reason and in the Arts Faculty of the University of Paris the arena in which the first great struggles for the freedom to inquire were waged.[46] This is saying a great deal and in terms that would have appeared strange had they been used at the time. It is true that the theologians and the "artists" did not fear to undertake new investigations, especially where dogma was not yet defined.[47] They rightly saw that each science had its own method which it ought to follow[48] and that open discussion of opinions voiced by diverse speakers could, even when erroneous, lead to the discovery of truth.[49] Likewise they believed that it was their duty to proclaim, if needed, certain truths that could easily displease the rich and powerful.[50] In the process they came to see that the very notion of orthodoxy was not without raising some difficulties which it were better to make clear,[51] and they often vehemently protested against the abuses of authority in this matter. Godfrey of Fontaine was indignant that a local bishop, Etienne Tempier, had arrogated to himself the right to decide for all Christendom what was or was not heretical.[52] These were all questions that were liable to be raised in any religious society once it attained a certain level of intellectual development, and they were debated with ever greater ardor by the scholastics of the late Middle Ages.

Matters could not rest at statements of such a general order, however. Although the "artists" might like to pretend that by virtue of their methods they were dispensed from taking into account the teachings of theology, everything depended on what the use of these methods yielded. In this instance, judgment no longer bore exclusively on the truth itself, but on the conduct of the master who proposed as true or at least probable from the viewpoint of natural reason such and such a teaching of a blatantly anti-Christian character.

It is hard for us to determine what position Siger of Brabant could have taken on this question. The direction on which he was bent was clearly dangerous. Like most of his contemporaries, he had to state his position on the nature of theology, its methods, its place in the order of learning, and how it was distinct from philosophical theology. More philosopher than theologian, he seems to have wanted to hold only to the notion of divine theology as a wisdom at once both speculative and practical while reserving for philosophy the name of science and the solution to the doubts besetting seekers.[53] The scattered indications his works provide on this matter would deserve to be studied more deeply, both in themselves as well as in the context of the debates that were taking place in this domain at the time. It is possible, as F Van Steenberghen has always maintained, that he remained sincerely attached to the faith without resolving the antinomies that were brought to light through inquiry that was not founded on Christian premises to begin with.[54] We may never know this for certain, unless current research and the publication of unedited manuscripts should shed unexpected light on the question. It is not enough to observe that he disavowed any opinion opposed to official teaching. Even if he were an unbeliever he was not held to make known his unbelief. This is not what is at issue here. Only one thing arrests our attention and that is that neither Siger nor Boethius had at his disposal the means that would have allowed him to express views that were so far from orthodox without casting doubt on the truth of Christian dogma and, consequently, arousing the opposition of Church authorities.

Their misfortune was thus not only to have erred, if that is what they did; it was to have overlooked the repercussions of the speculations they entertained in a Christian milieu. Siger and Boethius were without their knowing it "pre-Socratics," who had not sufficiently reflected on the human and social conditions of philosophy.[55] Tempier was well aware of this when he complained that their unguarded speech (*incauta locutio*) risked misleading simple people (*simplices*).[56] He did not take them to task for seeking just what Aristotle thought on these disputed questions; that was every commentator's task. It also does not seem that he was opposed to their faithfully exposing the thought of Aristotle. How could anyone proceed otherwise, once the texts of Aristotle were incorporated into the program of university instruction? Accordingly Siger

was right in saying, regarding the eternity of the world, that one should not conceal Aristotle's intention, even if it were contrary to revealed truth: "Sic autem celare philosophiam non est bonum; unde non est hic intentio Aristotelis celanda, licet sit contraria veritati."[57] What Tempier objected to very specifically was their presenting as acquired or demonstrable conclusions that were foreign to and even diametrically opposed to the fundamental principles of Christianity.

Wisdom would have counselled that one avoid the dilemma either by declaring, as did St. Thomas, that Aristotle's arguments were not conclusive or by adopting a tactic similar to that of the Arab philosophers, who ran with the hare and hunted with the hounds, so to speak, and thereby avoided any direct confrontation with orthodoxy. Siger did neither the one nor the other. His true master was neither St. Thomas nor Averroes, but an integral, untrimmed version of Aristotle whose thought was no longer cast in the "political" or Platonic mold that rounded off its edges when they appeared too rough.

Siger was not the only thirteenth century thinker to have overlooked this particular aspect of Arab philosophical thought. For lack of any genuine acquaintance with the work of al-Farabi, no one at that time could appreciate his true worth.[58] This fact should not surprise us. As often happens, al-Farabi's successors did not have to retrace all of the steps their master had taken. They preserved only the results of his investigation and were content for the rest to refer to the source on which they relied. It is typical of the intellectual situation in Christian lands that al-Farabi, the great inaugurator of what was later to be called Averroism—even though it is not always very clear what is meant by that term[59]—is not even mentioned, for example, in the *Errores philosophorum* of Giles of Rome published around 1270.[60] There is nothing suprising in the fact that the Latin Middle Ages, deprived of his masterworks, took so long to discover for itself the method he had employed so well. This discovery was reserved for the following generation, among whom many, henceforth alert to the risks they ran, sought to arm themselves against them and, without renouncing their pursuits, were concerned to avoid in their public statements anything that might conflict with truth and that could call upon them the wrath of increasingly vigilant authorities.

In the meantime other more or less successful attempts had been made to calm minds and reduce the antagonisms aroused by Tempier's abrupt move. One example can be found in the little book that Raymond Lull some twenty years later devoted to a study of the 219 propositions.[61] This curious work takes the form of a fictitious dialogue between Socrates, who plays the role of defender of the condemned theses, and Lull himself, who opposes the theses. As one might expect, the author takes the better part for himself, whereas poor Socrates is given a hard time at every turn without mounting the least resistance. Lull has only to state his position on a question for Socrates to agree with his arguments, even if the evidence at times is thin. He thus comes to accept without any hesitation the necessity of revelation and almost all the great dogmas of Christianity. At the end of the discussion, Socrates happily concurs with his adversary's viewpoint. His surrender is complete. Once the harmony between faith and reason is duly reestablished, the two interlocutors have only to embrace and in common accord proceed to Paris to seek with humility and devotion the approbation of the bishop and the masters in theology.[62] There is some irony in this, especially when one recalls how the Socrates of the Platonic dialogues was not fond of blessings and had a seemingly short memory when it came to fulfilling his religious obligations.[63]

The reader is dumbfounded at such a simpleton as Socrates. One has to wonder if Lull really believed that such a thorny problem could be resolved by the sleight of hand he invented. The question no doubt calls for a more thorough examination. In the meantime, it is striking that Lull had the idea of placing the doctrines to which he objects under the patronage of a certain philosopher by the name of Socrates—"*quidam philosophus, Socrates nomine.*" It would seem that Lull also saw in these doctrines a summary of the positions human reason tends to embrace when it relies exclusively on its own abilities.[64]

* * *

In seeking to make a rapprochement with philosophy, the theologians had succeeded in giving their discipline a more scientific character. They could hope that the philosophers would reciprocate by being more open to revealed truth. Other minds, less respectful of established authority but no less aware of the power it wielded, refused to pay so high a price for the compromise they were offered and took a route hitherto unknown in the West. The spectacular failure of the way the doctrinal conflicts of the last quarter of the thirteenth century were settled remained etched in the memory of some thinkers. Dante testifies to this in the famous verses he devotes to Siger in the *Comedy*. Siger, whose "everlasting light" shines next to that of St. Thomas in the heaven of the sun, is not accused of error. His only mistake was to have thought, literally syllogized, *"invidiosi veri*," that is, truths susceptible of attracting the ill will or envy of his contemporaries.[65] That is what cost him his career and, by a chance occurrence perhaps not unconnected to the controversies in which he engaged, his life. Detained at the papal court in Orvieto, Siger found the end "coming much too slowly," so much was he burdened by "oppressive thoughts"—"*pensieri gravi.*" We know

that he died in his prime, at about the age of forty-four, very probably assassinated by a demented cleric.[66] Such an unenviable fate was cause for reflection on the part of those who ran similar risks in the future.

Soon new works would appear against which it would be difficult to make the same reproaches but which might conceal, under passably orthodox guise, a mind that was no longer of the preceding generation. The case of Dante, the greatest "political" thinker of this entire period, will show what constitutes this extraordinary feat.

## Notes

1 See Étienne Gilson, *Études de philosophie médiévale* (Strasbourg: Commission des publications de la Faculté des lettres de l'Université de Strasbourg, 1921), 53; A. Hayen, *Saint Thomas d'Aquin et la vie de /'Église* (Louvain: Publications universitaires, 1952), 24–26; and Fernand Van Steenberghen, *La philosophie au XIIIe siècle* (Louvain: Publications universitaires, 1966), 81–83, 381–382, 513–514.

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> "Le jour où le fanatisme fit peur aux souverains, la philosophie disparut, les manuscrits en furent détruits par ordonnance royale, et les chrétiens seuls se souvinrent que l'islamisme avait eu des savants et des penseurs. Là est, selon moi, la plus curieuse leçon qui résulte de toute cette histoire. La philosophie arabe offre l'exemple à peu près unique d'une très haute culture supprimée presque instantanément sans laisser de traces, et à peu près oubliée du peuple qui l'a créée. . . . Quand Averroès mourut, en 1198, la philosophie arabe perdit en lui son dernier représentant, et le triomphe du Coran sur la libre pensée fut assure pour au moins six cents ans. (Ernest Renan, *Averroès et l'averroïsme,* in *Oeuvres complètes d'Ernest Renan*, III, ed. H. Psichari [Paris: Calmann-Levy, 1949], 23, 13).

See also H. A. Wolfson, *Studies in the History of Philosophy and Religion*, *I* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1973), 430.

3 See, among other sources, St. Basil the Great, "Address to Young Men on Reading Greek Literature," in *The Wisdom of Catholicism*, ed. Anton C. Pegis (New York: Random House, 1949), 8–26.

4 See Deuteronomy 21.10–14; Saint Jerome, Epistle 70, 2, 5; and Sidonius Apollinaris, *Epistle* IX, 9, 12. On these and similar texts, see Ernest L. Fortin, *Christianisme et culture philosophique au cinquième siècle* (Paris: Études augustiniennes, 1959), 64–74.

5 See Jerome, *Epistle* 70, 2, 4.

6 See Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine* II, 9, 14–42, 63.

7 See Ernest L. Fortin, "Christianity and Hellenism in Basil the Great's Address *ad adulescentes*," in *The Birth of Philosophic Christianity,* Ernest L. Fortin: Collected Essays I, ed. Brian J. Benestad (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 1996), 137–151.

8 For an overview, see F. Van Steenberghen, *Aristotle in the West*, trans. Leonard Johnston (Louvain: E. Nauwelaerts, 1955); and Charles Lohr, "Aristotle in the West: Some Recent Books," *Traditio* 25 (1969): 417–431.

9 The text of the condemnation can be found in H. Deniflé and E. Chatelain, eds., *Chartu/arium Universitatis Pansiensis* (Paris: Delalain, 1889), I, 543ff. Subsequent citations are from the English translation by Ernest L. Fortin and Peter D. O'Neill, "Condemnation of 219 Propositions," in *Medieval Political Philosophy*, 335–354. The translation follows the arrangement of the propositions according to logical order established by P. Mandonnet, *Siger de Brabant et l'averroïsme latin au XIIIe siècle: Textes inédits* (Louvain: Institut supérieur de philosophie de l'Univerité, 1908), 175–191. All subsequent citations are taken from this translation.

10 "The conflicts resulted in the great condemnation of 1277. . . . But this condemnation had much wider repercussions; it was the pivot on which turned the whole doctrinal history of that period; it was the solution to the crisis which Aristotle's appearance in Paris had caused." F. Van Steenberghen, *Aristotle in the*

*West*, 230. See E. Gilson, *History,* 408. On the nature and import of Tempier's decree, see also F. Van Steenberghen, *Maître Siger de Brabant* (Louvain: Publications universitaires, 1977), 149–158; J. E Wippel, "The Condemnations of 1270 and 1277 at Paris," *Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies* 7 (1977): 169–201.

11 See Pierre Duhem, *Études sur Leonard de Vinci* II (Paris: A. Hermann, 1906–1913), 411ff.; Alexandre Koyré, "Le vide et l'espace infini au XIVe siècle," *Archives d'histoire doctrinale et littéraire du moyen-âge* 17 (1949): 45.

12 See P. Glorieux, "Tempier (Étienne)," *Dictionnaire de théologie catholique,* XV (Paris: Letouzey et Ané, 1902), col. 102–103, 106; F. Van Steenberghen, *La philosophie au XIIIe siècle* (Louvain: Publications universitaires, 1966), 487–488; and E. Gilson, *History*, 728, n. 52.

13 See Proposition 195: "That without a proper agent, such as a father and a man, God could not make a man."

14 See, for example, Proposition 196: "That to make an accident exist without a subject has the nature of an impossibility implying contradiction."

15

> You may object: "If we ought not to call a man an unbeliever for violating unanimity in cases of interpretation, because no unanimity is conceivable in such cases, what do you say about the Muslim philosophers like Abu Nasr [al-Farabi] and Ibn Sina [Avicenna]? For Abu Hamid [Al-gazel] called them both definitely unbelievers in the book of his known as the *Incoherence* [*of the Philosophers*], on three counts: their assertion of the pre-eternity of the world and that God, the Exalted, does not know particulars" (may He be exalted far above that [ignorance]!), "and their interpretation of the passages concerning the resurrection of bodies and states of existence in the next life." Averroes, *The Decisive Treatise, Determining What the Connection Is between Religion and Philosophy, in Medieval Political Philosophy*, 171–172)

See Ralph Lerner, "Maimonides' Letter on Astrology," *History of Religions* 8, no. 2 (1968): 143–158.

16 *Metaphysics* X, 9, 1074b34.

17 See Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* I, q. 46, art. 2, and *De Potentia,* q. 3, art. 14, ad 16; Augustine, *City of God* X, 31. Avicenna, who seems to have held the same view, was attacked on this point by John of Jardun; see Armand Maurer, "John of Jardun and the Divine Causality," *Medieval Studies* 17 (195): 185–207. See also Proposition 83: "That the world, although it was made from nothing, was not newly-made, and, although it passed from non-being to being, the nonbeing did not precede being in duration but only in nature."

18 See Aristotle, *Topics* I, 11, 104b16. See also Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae,* I, q. 46, art. 1, and *Summa Contra Gentiles* II, 30–38.

19 See Aristotle, *De Caelo* I, 2–4, 10–12; and III, 2.

20 See Proposition 112: "That the elements are eternal. They were nevertheless newly produced in the disposition that they now possess." See Maimonides, *Guide* II, 13, in which he explains that the notion of creation is unanimously rejected by philosophers. According to the *Guide*, this is the point of greatest opposition between philosophy and the Torah. On Maimonides's position on this question, see S. Pines, "Maïmonide et la philosophie latine," in *Actas del V Congreso Internacional de Filosofia Medieval,* I (Madrid: Editora Nacional, 1979), I, 219–229.

21 The existence of free will in God is explicitly denied by Proposition 20: "That God of necessity makes whatever comes immediately from Him." See Proposition 23: "That God cannot move anything irregularly, that is, in a manner other than that in which He does, because there is no diversity of will in Him." On the rejection of creation, see Propositions 187, 188, and especially 189: "That creation is not possible, even

though the contrary must be held according to the faith."

22 See Proposition 13: "That God does not know things other than himself." See also Propositions 14 and 15.

23 See Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles* II, 46.

24 See Maimonides, *Guide* III, 18, in which he cites al-Farabi's lost commentary on the *Nicomachean Ethics*: "Those who have the capacity of making their soul pass from one moral quality to another are those of whom Plato has said that God's providence watches over them to a higher degree." See Proposition 170: "That all the good that is possible to man consists in the intellectual virtues." Similar ideas occur frequently in Latin commentaries on the *Nicomachean Ethics* of the late thirteenth century. See René A. Gauthier, "Trois commentaires 'averroïstes' sur l'Éthique à Nicomaque," *Archives d'histoire doctrinale et littéraire du moyen-âge* 16 (1947–1948): 275–277, 288–293.

25 See Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 22, art. 2; I, q. 103, art. 1, 5; and *Summa Contra Gentiles* III, 64, 113.

26 See Aristotle, *De Anima* III, 5, 430a23; and *Metaphysics* X, 3, 1070a26. "Sed numquam invenitur Philosophus determinare de his quae sunt animae separatae et statu eius." Siger of Brabant, *Quaestiones de anima intellectiva* VI, in *Siger*, ed. Mandonnet, 164. See also Proposition 218: "That nothing can be known about the intellect after its separation." For a further discussion of this problem, see Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles* II, 81; and *Summa Theologiae* I, q. 89.

27 See Thomas Aquinas, *In libros Ethicorum Aristotelis expositio* I, 1, 62; I, 16, 215–225; III, 5, 133; III, 18, 90; X, 13, 30; and *In libros Politicorum Aristote/is expositio* II, 1, 46.

28 According to Ibn Tufayl, al-Farabi taught that every opinion that held happiness not to be reducible to the happiness of this life is founded exclusively on "senseless ravings and old wives' tales." *Ibn Tufayl's Hayy Ibn Taqzan,* trans. Lenn Evan Goodman (Los Angeles: Gee Tee Bee, 1991), 100; and Maimonides, *Guide,* translator's introduction, lxxx. On how al-Farabi's apparently contradictory remarks on the immortality of the soul are reconcilable, see L. Strauss, *Persecution*, 13–15. See also Proposition 172: "That happiness is had in this life and not in another."

29 See Proposition 202: "That one should not pray."

30 See Proposition 69: "That God cannot produce the effect of a secondary cause without the secondary cause itself." See also Propositions 28, 177, 214, 215, 216, and the remarks of Gilson, *History*, 407–408.

31 See Proposition 182: "That one does not know anything more by the fact that he knows theology."

32 See Proposition 183: "That the teachings of the theologian are based on fables"; and Proposition 7: "That, besides the philosophic disciplines, all the sciences are necessary, but that they are necessary only on account of human custom."

33 See Proposition 2: "That the only wise men in the world are the philosophers"; and Proposition 1: "That there is no more excellent state than to study philosophy."

34 See Proposition 211: "That humility, in the degree to which one does not show what he has but depreciates and lowers himself, is not a virtue." Humility of course is not among the moral virtues Aristotle enumerates in *Nicomachean Ethics.* On the discussions to which this problem has given rise, see R. A. Gauthier, *Magnanimité* (Paris: J. Vrin, 1951), 466–480; and *Trois commentaires*, 294–328.

35 Bonaventure, Third Sunday of Advent, Sermon 2, *Opera omnia* (Quaracchi) IX, 62–63. See J. Guy Bougerol, *Introduction to the Works of Bonaventure,* trans. J. de Vinck (Paterson, N.J.: St. Anthony Guild Press, 1963), 150–151.

36 See M. Grabmann, "Das Werk De Amore des Andreas Capellanus und das Verteilungsdekret des Bishofs Tempier von Paris vom März 1277," *Speculum* 7 (1932): 75–79; A. J. Denomy, "The 'De Amore' of Andreas Capellanus and the Condemnation of 1277," *Mediaeval Studies* 8 (1946): 107–149; and "Andreas Capellaneus: Discovered or Rediscovered?" *Mediaeval Sudies* 8 (1946): 300-301.

37 On the manuscripts of this treatise, see L. Thorndike and P. Kibre, *A Catalogue of Incipits of Mediaeval Scientific Writings in Latin* (London: Medieval Academy of America, 1963), 515. The text has been partially edited by P. Tannery, *Mémoires scientifiques* IV (Cairo, 1920), 405–409.

38 "We likewise condemn the books, scrolls, and leaflets dealing with necromancy, or containing experiments in fortune-telling, invocations of devils or incantations endangering lives, or in which these and similar things evidently contrary to the orthodox faith and good morals are treated" (Condemnation of 219 Propositions, preface).

39 *Andreae Capellani Regii Francorum De Amore libri tres*, ed. Trojel (Munich: Eidos Verlag, 1964), 358.

40 *De Amore*, 313.

41 *De Amore,* 358–360.

42 "Res enim est amor, quae ipsam imitatur naturam; ergo nec amantes ipsi aliter dis-cemere debent hominum genera, quam amor suo discernit iudicio" (*De Amore,* 37–38).

43 See Isidore of Seville, *Etymologies* VIII, 9 [P.L., 82:310–314]; and Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae,* II-II, q. 95, art. 3. On geomancy, see P. Tannery, *Mémoires,* 295–412. The word "geomanteia" has not been found in any ancient Greek text. Nonetheless the passage from Varro cited by Isidore may originate in a Greek source. The term is vague in antiquity and only later was it used for the specific divinaton process that became known in the Latin West from the second half of the twelfth century. See *Mémoires,* 318–319.

44 The usual method consisted of inscribing in the sand a more or less lengthy series of markings along four parallel lines. Next, all these markings would be erased by pairs except for the last (or, in the case of an even number, the last two). The process would yield a formula that could be expressed numerically as follows: 1-1-1-1, 1-2-1-1, 1-2-2-1, etc. Each of the sixteen possible combinations corresponded to a planet or a sign or the zodiac. See L. Thorndike, *A History of Magic and Experimental Science*, II (New York: Macmillan, 1929), 837–838.

45 "Ce qui manque au Xlle siècle pour poser une réalité concrete sous ce mode de symboles, c'est la conception d'une nature ayant une structure en soi et une inelligibilité pour soi, si faible soit-elle. Nous sommes à la veille du jour ou cette conception va se former, et c'est à la physique aristotelicienne que le XIIIe siècle le devra" (E. Gilson, *La philosophie au moyen âge* [Paris: Payot, 1952], 343). See also F. Van Steenberghen, "Qu'apportait la 'physique' d'Aristote aux penseurs du XIIIe siècle?" in *Académie royale de Belgique, Bulletin de la classe des lettres,* 5e série, 50 (1964): 331–343. On anticipations of the doctrine of nature in the preceding century, see M. D. Chenu, *Nature, Man, and Society in the Twelfth Century*, trans. J. Taylor and L. Little (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968), 1–48.

46

> Their assertions are thus, it seems, the earliest instances in the Western tradition in which the conception of freedom in teaching is explicitly founded, not on the idea of the pursuit of the truth, but on the right of the teacher to discuss his materials regardless of their truth. . . . But their basic function was teaching, and their fundamental freedom was the liberty of the teacher first explicitly asserted by Siger of Brabant. (M. M. McLaughlin, "Paris Masters of the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries and Ideas of Intellectual Freedom," *Church History* 24 [1955]: 199 and 207)

47 See Godfrey of Fontaine, *Quodlibetales* III, q. 5.

48 Siger of Brabant sought to proceed "*naturaliter*" in discussing natural things: *"Quaerimus hic solum intentionem philosophorum et praecipue Aristotelis, etsi forte Philosophus senserit aliter quam veritas se habeat et per revelationem aliqua de anima tradita sint, quae per rationes naturales concludi non possunt. Sed nihil ad nos nunc de Dei miraculis, cum de naturalibus naturaliter disseramus"* (*Quaestiones de anima intellectiva* III, *Siger*, ed. Mandonnet, 153–154). See other texts cited in McLaughlin, "Paris Masters," 209 n. 23.

49 See Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on the Metaphysics of Aristotle* III, 1, 342; and Godfrey of Fontaine, *Quodlibetales* XII, q. 5.

50 See, for example, Henry of Ghent, *Quodlibetales* VII, q. 20.

51 See Godfrey of Fontaine, *Quodlibetales* XII, q. 5; VII, q. 18; III, q. 10; and Henry of Ghent, *Quodlibetales* XV, q. 15.

52 See Godfrey of Fontaine, *Quodlibetales* XII, q. 5.

53 See W. Dunphy and A. Maurer, "A Promising New Discovery for Sigerian Stdies," *Mediaeval Studies* 29 (1967): 366–369; and the pertinent remarks of G. H. Allard, *Laval théologique et philosophique* 35 (1979): 98–100.

54 See F. Van Steenberghen, *Siger de Brabant d'après ses oeuvres inédites,* II (Louvain: Editions de l'Institut supérieur de philosophie, 1942), 677–700; *La Philosophie au XIIIe siècle* , 389–390; *Maître Siger*, 229–257; *Thomas Aquinas and Radical Aristotelianism* (Washington D. C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1980), 75–110; and A. Forest, *Le Mouvement doctrinal du XIe au XIIIe siècle* (Paris: Bloud et Gay, 1956), 294–295.

55 We know from Pierre Dubois that Siger commented on the *Politics* of Aristotle. See *De recuperatione terrae sanctae,* 121–122. There is however no evidence that he was acquainted with the Platonic character of the Arab philosophers' political thought. See the list of his works in Van Steenberghen, *Maître Siger*, 177–221; and Wolfson, *Studies* I, 430–440.

56 "Lest, therefore, this unguarded speech lead simple people into error, we . . . strictly forbid these and like things and totally condemn them." *Condemnation of 219 Propositions*, preface.

57 Siger of Brabant, *Quaestiones super librum Metaphysicorum* III, 15, 34–36.

58 "[L]es Farabi, les Avicenne, les Averroès: deux noms emergent (en Occident): Avicenne (Ibn Sina) . . . et plus tard Averroès (Ibn Ruschd), le Commentateur" (L. Gardet and M. M. Anawati, *Introduction à la théologie musulmane* [Paris: J. Vrin, 1970], 245). Even at that the Latin Middle Ages had no knowledge of either Averroes's *Decisive Treatise, Determining What the Connection Is Between Religion and Philosophy* or his commentary on Plato's *Republic*, which was not translated until 1491. These works would have given medieval authors a new perspective on the political thought of the Arab philosophers. The errors that Giles of Rome attributes to Averroes in his *Errores philosophorum* are all drawn from his commentaries on Aristotle's *Physics*, *De anima,* and *Metaphysics*. On Giles's interpretations, see Wolfson, *Studies* I, 373–383.

59 See O. Kristeller, *Renaissance Thought*, II (New York: Harper and Row, 1965), 113–115; A. Maurer, "Averroism, Latin," in *New Catholic Encyclopedia* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1967), I, 1127–1129; and F. VanSteenberghen, "L'averroïsme latin," *Philosophica conimbricensia* 1 (1969): 1–32.

60 On Giles of Rome's *Errores philosophorum,* see Van Steenberghen, *Maître Siger*, 71–74.

61 Raymond Lull, *Declaratio Raymundi per modum dialogi edita contra aliquorum philosophorum et eorum sequacium opiniones erroneas et damnatas a venerabili Patre Domino Episcopi Parisiensi*, ed. O. Keicher, *Raymundus Lullus und seine Stellung zur arabischen Philosophie* (Münster, 1909), 97–221. See also G. Bonsafede, "La condanna di Stefano Tempier e la Declaratio di Raimundo Lullo," *Estudios Lulianos* 4 (1960): 21–44; F. Van Steenberghen, "La signification de l'oeuvre anti-averroïste de Raymond Lull," *Estudios Lulianos* 4 (1960): 113–128; and J. N. Hilgarth, *Ramon Lull and Lullism in Fourteenth Century France* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), 249–251.

62 Lull, *Declaratio* 221, 20–35.

63 See Plato, *Phaedo* 118a, and *Euthyphro* 15d, in which Socrates compares himself to Menelaus. In *Odyssey* IV, 472–473, Menelaus's misfortunes are attributed to his refusal to sacrifice to Zeus and the immortal gods.

64 On the persisting influence of Tempier's condemnation on late thirteenth- and early fourteenth-century authors, see P. Glorieux, "Tempier," in *Dictionnaire de théologie catholique* XV, col. 104–107.

65 "This light from whom your gaze returns to me contains a spirit whose oppressive thoughts made him

see death as coming much too slowly: it is the everlasting light of Siger, who when he lectured in the Street of Straw, demonstrated truths that earned him envy." Dante, *Paradiso* 10, 133–138. On "envy" in this sense, see Dante, *Convivio* 1, 4, 6–8, and the text of the Paris MS. Nat. Lat. 14698, quoted in R. A. Gauthier, *Magnanimité*, 468–469:

66 On Siger's flight from Paris in 1276, see A. Dondaine, "Le manuel de l'inquisiteur (1230–1330)," *Archivum Fratrum Praedicatorum* 17 (1947): 186–192. On his last years, see P. Mandonnet, *Siger*, 262–286; P. Glorieux, "Siger de Brabant," in *Dictionnaire de théologie catholique* XIV, col. 2044; and F. Van Steenberghen, *Maître Siger,* 21–27, 159–165. Scholars have often wondered about the presence of Siger in Dante's *Paradiso*. Acccording to Van Steenberghen, who concurs with Gilson on this point, Siger appears in the *Comedy* solely as a personification of philosophy and not a disciple of St. Thomas:

> Il (Dante) voulait un représentant de la philosophie, de la grande philosophie aristotelicienne. Ce philosophe devait etre chrétien . . . et partisan de l'autonomie de la philosophie. . . . Maître Siger remplissait toutes les conditions requises. Dante fait de lui la personnification de la philosophie autonome, l'allié de Thomas et d'Albert dans la lutte qu'ils ont menée pour donner droit de cité au Philosophe dans le monde chrétien. . . . L'énigme de Siger est desormais éclaircie. (*Maître Siger,* 176).

The discovery of Siger's questions on the *Liber de causis* has shown that near the end of his life Siger was close to Thomas Aquinas on some matters but remained faithful to his own views on the relation of faith and reason. This would explain better why Dante placed him next to St. Thomas and St. Albert the Great. See A. Zimmerman, "Dante hatte doch recht: Neue Ergebnisse der Forschung über Siger von Brabant," *Philosophisches Jahrbuch* 75 (1968): 207–211; W. Dunphy and A. Maurer, "A Promising New Discovery for Sigerian studies," *Medieval Studies* 29 (1967): 364–369; and E. P. Mahoney, "Saint Thomas and Siger of Brabant Revisited," *Review of Metaphysics* 27 (1974): 531–553. But one can also consider that Dante wanted to contrast rather than compare the two thinkers. St. Thomas insists on the fact that he belonged to St. Dominic's flock, whose sheep "fatten well" as long as they stay close to the fold. See *Paradiso* 10, 44–96; 11, 26 and 139; and Proverbs 11.25. It is hard to read these words without thinking on the one hand of St. Thomas's legendary obesity and on the other of Siger's detention and premature death at the papal court of Orvieto in 1284. What Siger lacked more than anything was the "discerning language" of St. Thomas that Dante praises in *Paradiso* 12, 144.

# CHAPTER FOUR

## *Dante and Philosophical Allegory*

### The Pedagogical Intent of the *Comedy*

The name Dante evokes above all the author of the *Comedy*, the poetic masterwork of the Middle Ages and, by universal acclaim, one of the most brilliant literary works of Western civilization. It was through the *Comedy*, much more than his philosophical treatises—*Convivio*, *De vulgari eloquentia,* and *Monarchy*—that Dante sought to communicate to his contemporaries and their descendants the comprehensive vision of the world that inspired his thought and was his poem's most precious element.

It is rare in our time to base the worth of a poem on its intellectual content no less than on its formal beauty. Modern aesthetics does not tolerate very well the fusion of these two elements. It does not readily acknowledge that a poet can be at the same time a thinker or, if he is, that his thought can be an integral part of his work. As autonomous creation rather than imitation of nature, poetry could in no way be subject to criteria that are alien to it. It has no new truths to teach us, except accidentally, and what the author may have sought to say has nothing to do with how we judge him as a poet. All that matters is the harmony or internal cohesion of his poem and the subjective delight that the contemplation of this harmony can elicit in us.[1]

Nothing is further from the thought of Dante, whose aim was none other than to teach men how they are to live or how they might leave the state of misery in which they languish for a better and happier state,[2] or, as the *Comedy* states, how one goes from slavery to freedom, from the human to the divine, from time to eternity.[3] Moreover, Dante was convinced that of all the senses to be found in his work, none was more useful than its moral sense.[4]

The idea of the poet as educator, even as legislator, is a strange idea which has little to do with what since the nineteenth century we take to be the essence of poetry. Yet this is how the ancients spoke of those great poets of genius who embodied the soul of the nation. Such was Virgil, the herald of the new Roman empire, whom Dante still took as his "master" and "author."[5] Such, above all, was Homer, the "sovereign poet,"[6] who with good reason was taken to be the teacher of the Greeks.[7] To be Greek was to have been formed at his school, to have followed him since childhood, to measure one's worth by his heroes, to owe to him all that one needed to know in order to excel among one's own. This is the legacy, transmitted from generation to generation, that constituted the common patrimony which every lawgiver was to build on, the *primum quoad nos* that henceforth served as the starting point for all speculative activity or for any new enterprise. For centuries, the Greeks knew no other world.

Such a profound influence does not come about from a purely theoretical pedagogy, however. It is ordinarily exercized by means of narratives that affect above all the reader's imagination and awaken in him the full range of emotions he is capable of experiencing. Men become happy or miserable by their actions and these form the web of poetic narrative.[8] These actions have their wellspring in passions which the poet has the gift to penetrate and describe better than anyone else—to describe and set right by giving them a suitable object. From reading his works one came without being aware of it to love what is truly beautiful, to feel sorrow only for what is worthy of pity, to take delight in what is noble and to detest what is not, and one acted accordingly.

These passions are not those of human nature *tout court* but of a human nature previously subjected to a number of influences that stamp it from the start with its own particular character. The isolated individual, focused on himself, drawing all from himself, the one with whom aestheticism is concerned, is in fact an abstraction. Nowhere is man to be seen in the state of nature. Wherever one finds him and whatever his native dispositions, he is always fashioned, in some way contracted, by a great many acquired determinations. Thus to know him is not only to know that he exists but to see in him those character traits

that distinguish him from his fellows and push him to act in one way rather than another. His passions, his states of soul, his whole psychology are of only secondary interest. It is only by his deeds and the choice they imply of a particular goal or way of life that he manifests himself to us and that the poet in turn shows him to us. The envy of Achilles is not that of Alceste, nor his anger that of the Grand Inquisitor; the hypocrisy Dante ascribes to Boniface VIII is not the same as Tartuffe's; nor does Pier della Vigna take his life for the same motives as Lucretia or Cleopatra.[9]

These ways of behaving belong to very different worlds. They can be understood only in the light of a general perspective on human life that itself is affected in a decisive way by the political and social milieu in which they are manifested. The man who lives apart by himself is a diminished, incomplete being whose happiness will always be lacking something essential. Only civil society can ensure his full development and provide the outlets that match his energies and aspirations, but it does so by circumscribing the range of his activity from the start. We do not find the same types of men everywhere because the societies to which they belong display very diverse characteristics, according to differing circumstances. Some societies value piety above wisdom, warrior valor more than political prudence, riches over simplicity or moderation. To favor one or the other of these goals is of necessity to favor the human type that most corresponds to it and to devalue its opposite. Hegel remarked that for the Romans virtue could be summed up in one word: valor.[10] The same could not be said of the Greeks. Thus it is not accidental that republican Rome distinguished itself by its military exploits and by the virtues that made them possible; it fostered this kind of virtue and rewarded it by bestowing its highest honors on those who displayed them.

It follows that the poet concerns himself above all with problems of a political order and that it belongs to political philosophy, understood in its noblest sense, to study them. Dante lamented that this "mastery of public affairs" was too neglected in his time. He esteemed that it was high time to return to it and that it alone was capable of setting his compatriots on the right road by teaching them once again to live, not as "Babylonians," but as those noble Romans whose descendants they were.[11] He preferred the Florence of the old days, with its aristocratic ways and its frugality, to the new Florence and its upstarts thirsty for luxury and material gain[12]—not because he himself possessed titles of nobility but because upon examination the first seemed to him superior, more worthy of respect, more in conformity with human nature. There was no better means to show this than to depict the consequences of the "madness of rebellion"[13] that had arisen in his native city and nearly everywhere else in Italy, with its injustices, the fratricidal hatreds and wars it had unleashed, and the atrocities it could lead to. Dante did not accept the theocratic ideal of Boniface VIII, and he pleaded vigorously for the restoration of imperial power—not because he resented the pope responsible for his exile but because he thought the good order of society would be better served. This will also be his concern in the *Comedy*. He greatly admired Virgil, the poet of the empire, which the Germanic Holy Roman Empire had succeeded, but he was well aware that Virgil was pagan,[14] that what was possble in another time was no longer so today, that a new religion had appeared since then which made it impossible to use of the old solutions just as they were. This is not the least of the problems we shall encounter in his poem.

On all these questions it was necessary to make a choice based on a concrete analysis of the situation and undertaken in light of the principles of the political science the West had only recently taken hold of. The author of the *Comedy* was the first to undertake this analysis. He did so as a poet, of course, who knows how to take men as they are and reveal to them who they are and who also wants to show them what they could become if they wished to—who seeks at the same time to give his theme universal import and develop it in such a way that even someone who has no memory of the quarrels between the Guelphs and the Ghibellines could recognize himself.

Dante's undertaking would never have succeeded if he had not, as all great poets do, taken care to write for everyone: for those of average understanding and for those with more subtle minds in need of nourishment commensurate with their intelligence. Of all the methods available to him, the most notable is without doubt the one he himself called by the general term of allegory.

## Dante's Allegory

The most complete if not clearest indications Dante provides on this subject are to be found in two famous texts which have greatly vexed modern scholars. Jean Pépin has reviewed the controversies surrounding these texts and enriched the discussion with helpful observations of benefit to scholars.[15] My own intent is not to take up the question as a whole but to point out certain details that concern us more particularly and that Dante scholars, prompted by different concerns, for the most part have not taken into account.

The first of the two texts is found in the *Convivio* and deals with the various senses a literary work

possesses or can possess. Dante distinguishes four senses according to which he intends to interpret a few of his own *canzoni*: the literal, allegorical, moral, and anagogical senses.[16] In addition he notes that there is a difference between allegory as the poets make use of it and allegory as employed by the theologians. For the poets, the allegorical sense is the sense concealed under the cloak of their fables, "a truth disguised under a beautiful lie."[17] The truth is this case does not reside in the facts themselves which the author has invented from scratch, but solely in the ideas which they symbolize. Thus when Ovid speaks of Orpheus having the gift to tame the beasts and attract to himself the trees and the stones, what he says is not to be taken literally. The poet simply means to say that the wise man at times is able by his words to tame savage hearts and bend the will of people who, deprived of any attraction for science and the arts, are in fact much like stones.[18]

As for theological allegory, which Dante mentions only in passing, one can suppose that it builds on a literal sense which has nothing in it of fables or lies. The events narrated in the Bible did in fact take place of course, but they have an ulterior meaning that must equally engage the attention of the reader. We are no longer dealing with imaginary events from which one extracts an abstract truth valid for all time, but with real events which follow one another, often centuries apart, and which, in the language of theology, are linked to one another as type to antitype. The exodus from Egypt, to cite but one example, is not only a historical event; at the same time God willed it as a figure of the moral liberation of the Israelites or the redemption of the soul of man through baptism. The literal sense and the mystical sense are thus both true,[19] even though it is not necessary in every instance that the latter be found along with the first.[20] Dante affirms on this score that the allegory he employs in this work is the allegory of the poets rather than the theologians: "But because my purpose is to follow the mode of the poets, I understand the allegorical sense as it is used by the poets."[21]

This brief account is followed by a rather condensed discussion of what for Dante and the tradition before him constitutes the fundamental principle of all literary exegesis: the primacy of the literal sense. It is not that the literal sense is more important than the other senses, but any allegorical interpretation must necessarily be founded upon the literal sense.[22] A reader has before him only the letter of the text. This is his only access to the text's spiritual sense, for which it is an envelope or foundation. Thus one must always begin with the literal sense. To do otherwise would be not only "irrational" but "impossible."[23] The only way to plumb the depths of a work is to focus on the surface and allow oneself to be guided by it. The only valid way is to go from the better known to the lesser known, that is, from the outside to the inside or from the literal to the allegorical sense.[24]

The second text belongs to the *Letter to Cangrande della Scala*, which Dante wrote as an introduction to the third part of the *Comedy* and thereby of the entire poem. There Dante insists on the "polysemous" character of the *Comedy* and affirms that its literal sense also holds a spiritual or mystical sense which is allegorical, moral, or anagogical. Each of these three mystical senses can be called "allegorical" according to a wider meaning, since they all entail a transposition that allows the author to say something other than the proper meaning of the words he uses. According to the etymology he cites, the term "allegory" would have been formed from the Greek *alleon* and the Latin *alienum*, both of which mean "other" or "different."[25] To explain how they differ, Dante once again has recourse to the exodus from Egypt which means in the first place the departure of the Israelites in the time of Moses (the historical sense), but also the redemption wrought by Christ (the allegorical sense), the passing from the state of sin to the state of grace (the moral sense), and, lastly, the act by which the soul passes from bondage to the corruption of this world to eternal glory (the anagogical sense).[26] It follows from these observations that the subject of the *Comedy* is twofold. If one stays with the letter of the poem, it is a description of "the state of the soul after death," and if one looks for its allegorical or mystical sense, it is about man in his present state, "in the exercise of his free will, earning or becoming liable to the rewards or punishments of justice."[27]

Taken aback by the excesses of allegorical exegesis that gets the text to say just about anything one wants it to say,[28] some scholars deny that the *Comedy* should be interpreted allegorically and will accept only its literal or historical sense. Their theory has found few followers, however, for the simple reason that it is contradicted by what Dante himself asserts in very clear terms. The issue in the end as most scholars see it is not whether there is allegory in the *Comedy*, but what kind of allegory Dante employed, the allegory of the poets or the allegory of the theologians.

At first sight one would think that it would be the first kind, since Dante tells us in the *Convivio* that he opted for the allegory of the poets. However, Charles Singleton observes that in spite of many similarities the two texts are not identical. Unlike the *Convivio*, the *Letter to Cangrande* makes no mention of poetic allegory and refers exclusively to the allegory in use among the theologians. The four senses Dante

enumerates are those of traditional biblical exegesis and are illustrated, as we have seen, with one and the same example, the exodus from Egypt taken from Scripture.[29] There are thus no grounds for doubt. Whether Dante's thinking evolved from the *Convivio* to the Letter, under the likely influence of St. Thomas, or whether he saw fit to employ in the *Comedy* a different method than the one he deployed in the *Convivio,*[30] we would be dealing with an allegory that conforms in every way with the rules followed by the theologians. Contrary to what the poets do, Dante did not have to invent "beautiful lies" to convey his ideas to the reader; he already had at his disposal a whole array of real events and real characters to which he could give a *sensus plenior* in the manner of the sacred writers.[31]

Singleton's hypothesis, which was earlier proposed by Erich Auerbach,[32] is indeed seductive. However, a closer look at the matter reveals why other scholars have been reluctant to accept it. There are no doubt all sorts of historical characters in the *Comedy*, such as Virgil and Cato, who, thanks to the poet's magic, become the bearers of a new sense. But there are many others (in the *Inferno* there are just about as many) who by their origin belong to the world of pure fantasy and to whom it would be more than bold to ascribe real existence. Such are, among others, Charon, Ulysses, Briareus, Anteus, Capaneus, and all of those fabulous monsters who populate the bolges of hell—the Centaurs, Phlegyas, the Furies, Medusa, the Minotaur, Geryon—who, though taken from mythology, are no less "beautiful lies."[33] And while we are on the subject, what is one to make of the grandiose fabrication that serves as framework for the entire *Comedy* and allows the author, while still alive, to stroll at will through the circles of hell, climb the picturesque terraces of purgatory, and take an enchanted tour of the vast spaces of heaven? Is this not the most extraordinary of all of the pleasant lies with which the poem is filled?

The same is true of a great number of memorable scenes, beginning with the opening scene, which we can be sure have never existed save in the poet's imagination. Is one really to believe that one day Dante literally found himself in a dark wood and that three wild beasts blocked the way leading to the top of a mountain he attempted to climb in vain? No one has ever thought so, not even Singleton, who was obliged to make an exception to his general rule, at least for the first two cantos of *Inferno.*[34]

The partisans of poetic allegory are thus not completely wrong to deny that in the *Comedy* Dante renounced his old method in order to forge a new path. They have the poet's own words for it. The *Letter to Cangrande,* to which Singleton appealed in developing his thesis, says expressly that the subject of his poem was treated according to diverse modes, including the "poetic" and "fictive" mode.[35] Dante himself gives the poem the title of "comedy," stating clearly that comedy is a specific genre of "poetic narrative," [36] and every so often he invoked Apollo and the Muses,[37] something theologians are not in the habit of doing. It matters little that the *Comedy* is filled with historical characters or references to past or contemporary events. The poet is not required to draw everything from his imagination, and when he takes the matter of his narrative from history, it is not because he is a historian. Everything depends on the nature of his borrowings and the purpose they serve. Whatever Singleton may think, the Virgil who accompanies the pilgrim is not the same as the one who lived under Augustus. Dante gave him a new personality which we will never know apart from what the *Comedy* tells us about him.

It is true that the language of the *Letter to Cangrande* easily lends itself to confusion, and it is perhaps because they have not always understood it that the meaning of the letter has evaded readers. Dante uses the words literal (*litteralis* ) and historical (*historialis*) as synonyms,[38] which gives the impression that the literal sense refers to historical events. The adjective is nonetheless ambiguous, given that *historia,* from which it derives, can mean a "story" or "fable" as well as a historical account as such. To seek the poem's "literal or historical" sense is simply to see what the characters do, listen to what they say, and follow the episodes, without being concerned to know if they really happened or if they have any other existence apart from what the poet has given them. All this does not allow one to draw any conclusion about the nature of Dante's allegory.

It is not easy to see how, even if he had wanted to, Dante could have appealed to theological allegory, since the tradition always considered it as belonging to Sacred Scripture. If God can endow a particular character or event with a meaning that transcends it and so make it the type of something that will appear only much later, that is because He knows the future and wields absolute power over it. The poet has neither such knowledge nor such power. One does not avoid this objection by saying that Dante could "imitate God's way of writing," that his thinking was rooted in the faith or that he had knowledge of the world beyond "in the same way that the author of Genesis has knowledge of the creation."[39] Unless he received a special revelation, Dante knew no more than we do of the state of the soul after death, and if he believed he was inspired it would certainly not be in the same way as the sacred writers.

In applying the theory of the four senses to his work, Dante enlarged the scope of poetic allegory beyond

anything previously attributed to it. But since he did not feel bound by what his predecessors had done,[40] nothing prevented him from making an unprecedented use of the theory, as a close reading of a few passages of the *Comedy* will shortly make clear. In the meantime one should not take lightly the remarks in the *Convivio* and the *Letter* which help us identify the four senses and which reveal Dante's hermeneutic in a rather astute way. As an example of allegory the *Convivio* cites the case of Orpheus, that strange philosopher whose voice was such that it could reach all, even beings so deprived of reason as stones. The idea seems insignificant, even banal, but it may conceal a more subtle intention that can be seen in the use of the word "stones," which for Dante was the ready-made symbol for the Church and her leaders.[41] The theme comes up frequently in the *Comedy* , in which it is one of the poem's main ideas. Dante not only stated wherein the allegorical sense resided; he showed it to us by using it. To grasp this sense is to retrieve from beneath its covering the reality the poet had in mind but which he could not speak of without some reserve.

At first sight the moral sense presents no difficulty, even though Dante's explanation is not altogether clear. Dante illustrates it with the example of Christ at His Transfiguration accompanied by only three of the twelve apostles, which, Dante says, "may be interpreted morally to mean that in the most secret affairs we should have few companions."[42] This principle is not without interest, and for the pilgrim of the *Comedy* it will serve as a rule of conduct. What is even more curious, however, is that in the *Letter to Cangrande* Dante insists one should have recourse not to theology but to philosophical ethics for guidance in understanding the moral sense of his poem. It is as if the substance of the work and its theological content were not commensurable and that one had to look elsewhere, to philosophy, for its ultimate meaning: "The branch of philosophy which determines the procedure of the work as a whole and in this part is moral philosophy, or ethics."[43]

It is more difficult to situate within this framework the anagogical sense, which would have to do with "the departure of the soul from sin [and its being] made holy and free in its power."[44] This is nevertheless the subject of the *Comedy*, whose chief purpose is to depict the pilgrim's progressive liberation in search of a new happiness. But whence comes this liberation and how is it attained? The vaguely religious language of the *Convivio* and the *Letter* maintains a more or less respectful quasi silence on this score. Instead of answering the question, Dante invites the reader to raise it and to search the text to find the appropriate answer for himself.

It would seem from this that Dante's allegory is reducible to neither the allegory of the poet nor the allegory of the theologian, but that in what it has that is most distinctive it represents a third type of allegory that could be called philosophical allegory.[45] At least this is what Dante's first interpreters thought. Boccaccio notes in this connection that Dante was distinguished from the other poets of his time by the extent of his knowledge both in natural philosophy and in moral philosophy.[46] His work is not that of a poet *tout court*, but of a philosophical poet who, thanks to his extraordinary gifts of expression, has the advantage over the philosopher of making himself understood by all.[47] If he aims to "please" his readers, he also seeks to "instruct" them. Moreover, the teaching he grants them is addressed to two very distinct classes of people: first, the "prelates, priests, and preachers," to whose custody are committed "the frail souls" in their charge, and second, those "of an excellent learning who, either by reading what men in the past have written, or by writing what seems to them to have been omitted or not very clearly explained, inform the minds and souls of hearers and readers."[48] Thus his work holds two different meanings, one theological and the other mora1.[49] It is especially remarkable that in the very same place where Dante's poem meets the need of the learned, it also comes to the aid of the weak. In this "it is like a river [in which] the little lamb may wade, and the great elephant freely swim."[50] This is as much as to say that his deepest teaching is rarely the one that strikes us at first sight. This teaching, like that of the ancient poets who, "in order to please their lords," expressed themselves "under cover of various and masterly fictions,"[51] remains hidden and inaccessible to the hurried or distracted reader. There is nothing abnormal in the fact that everyone does not understand it in the same way and that some have seen the *Comedy* as the work of a poet, others as the work of a philosopher, and still others as that of a theologian.[52] None of these readers was completely wrong, since, in considering only one or another aspect of the poem, he did no more than what the author himself sought to do in addressing readers of unequal capacities.

Boccaccio's remarks are by no means original. They simply sum up what Dante had already said on the subject of the polysemous character of his poem, not only in the *Letter to Cangrande* but also in a whole range of passages which it would be useless to itemize exhaustively. The most famous is no doubt to be found in canto 9 of *Inferno*, in which the author for the moment abandons his role as pilgrim,[53] summons the reader at point-blank, and orders him to scrutinize the text so to extract from it "the teaching that is hidden here beneath the veil of verses so obscure."[54] These verses are indeed strange from the viewpoint of

their form by reason of the many sibilants they contain, but one can also think that the doctrine they refer to is no less strange.[55] Later, in canto 8 of *Purgatorio*, Dante addresses another injunction to the reader, this time summoning him to "let your eyes look sharp at truth, for now the veil has grown so very thin—it is not difficult to pass within."[56] Unfortunately, the veil does not allow itself to be pierced as quickly as one would wish, as the innumerable commentaries devoted to it testify.[57] It becomes even less transparent in the third canticle, in which Dante advises those who would want to follow him in his "little bark" to avoid the deep seas, for fear that "you may, by losing sight of me, be left astray,"[58] for "far worse than uselessly he leaves the shore (more full of error than he was before) who fishes for the truth but lacks the art."[59] He says, too, that "the sea that my audacious prow now cleaves... is no crossing for a little bark nor for a helmsman who would spare himself."[60]

The *Comedy* does not say everything, or, if it does, it does not always say it clearly. Dante tells his reader, "do not leave your bench . . . you will much delight before you tire" if you "stay and think on that of which you have foretaste," that is, what the text barely touches upon.[61] He will do well to have "let this weigh as lead to slow your steps, to make you move as would a weary man to yes or no when you do not see clearly."[62] Elsewhere, Dante uses a different metaphor. To soar to the heights, one will need "wings" similar to those Beatrice bestowed upon the heavenly voyager.[63] Whoever does not don them will just as soon wait for a dumb man to give him news of the wonders he has witnessed.[64]

The extent to which, without appearing to do so, Dante speaks of himself and of his work in the *Comedy* has not always been understood. One notable instance is the famous inscription on the gates of hell at the beginning of canto 3 of *Inferno*:

THROUGH ME THE WAY INTO THE SUFFERING CITY,
THROUGH ME THE WAY TO THE ETERNAL PAIN,
THROUGH ME THE WAY THAT RUNS AMONG THE LOST.
JUSTICE URGED ON MY HIGH ARTIFICER;
MY MAKER WAS DIVINE AUTHORITY,
THE HIGHEST WISDOM, AND THE PRIMAL LOVE.[65]

According to their literal sense these verses obviously refer to the door that leads to the infernal realm and very effectively evoke the feeling of distress the place engenders. Yet one does not imagine that it is really by such a door that the damned slide into hell. The poet's intention becomes clearer once one notes that the triple "*per me*" of the first strophe accords better with the hell that the poet will have the reader visit and of which he himself is the divine artificer or "*fattore*," eager to execute through his work the prodigious design of judging the living and the dead and to show men what they must do or not do to be happy "in this life."[66]

At the entrance to Purgatory Dante and Virgil once again find themselves before a door, but this time the door does not let everyone pass through. To open it one needs two keys, the one of gold and the other of silver. The one is "more precious," whereas "the other needs much art and skill before it will unlock—that is the key that must undo the knot."[67] In principle these two keys are the ones that long ago were handed over to St. Peter and his successors. Medieval theology saw in them the twofold power of the Church to judge the dispositions of a sinner (*potestas judicandi*) and to absolve him of his sins (*potestas ligandi et solvendi*). The first of these two acts necessarily precedes the second, since only once a penitent has given evidence of his repentance will he obtain the forgiveness he seeks. Hence the remark which follows: "first with the white, then with the yellow key, he [the angel] plied the gate so as to satisfy me."[68] In reading these words one cannot avoid thinking of another door that is locked—the door of the *Comedy*, the poem that "needs much art and skill" to be understood well. The idea imposes itself the more since Dante has just said, in a further address to the reader, "how I lift my matter; do not wonder, therefore, if I have to call on more art to sustain it."[69] The *Comedy* surely contains nothing more precious or profound than the thought for which it serves as the vehicle, however difficult it is to attain it. For the reader to whom it matters, in the end only this thought matters, but since it is always expressed in a more or less clandestine fashion, we will never succeed in grasping it if we do not begin by turning the second key in the lock, since only it can uravel the secret or the "knot."[70]

What are we to make of these admonitions and their many echoes throughout the *Comedy*, and what is that "bread of angels" unto which a few turned their minds, those who could commit their vessel "to the deep-salt sea, keeping their course within my wake ahead of where waves smooth again?"[71] According to the prevailing view, Dante's sole ambition would be to make the teachings of the Christian faith more

attractive by clothing them in images and allegorical garb. The kernel of hidden truth on which we ought to fix our gaze would correspond by and large to the body of doctines that the treatises, sermons, and liturgical texts of his time dealt with in discursive or nonmetaphorical ways. By its content the *Comedy* is an essentially theological work that would bring us back by infinitely diverse paths to what is "already conceptually elaborated and established in Christian doctrine."[72] In the end the poem would simply be a wonderfully sublime and profound poetic transposition of the truths that nurtured the piety of the faithful and exercized the minds of the great medieval doctors. Only a precise knowledge of the theological tradition would make it possible to illuminate the poem's inmost depths. This view appears even less open to question since it is rooted in what Dante himself says when he recommends that whoever wishes to understand him should read the Bible, St. Augustine, and a few of the most esteemed theologians of the Middle Ages, such as St. Bernard and Richard of St. Victor.[73] This provides further warrant to insist on the fundamentally theological character of Dante's allegory.

No one would think of denying that the *Comedy* contains all that we have just spoken of. In spite of this, the fact remains that the poem also contains many other elements that bear little resemblance to what Christian theologians were unanimous in teaching. Moreover, Dante affirms again and again that his intention is to deal with questions that none of his predecessors had taken up or, to use his own image, that "the waves I take were never sailed before."[74] If we take him seriously (short of any new dispensation, there is no good reason not to), we could easily suspect him of being less orthodox than he is usually thought to be. Perhaps it will be said that these supposed novelties are of secondary importance and in no way affect the substance of his thinking.[75] To be sure of one's position, one would have to know exacly what the hidden depths of the poem are. If there is such a secret, where shall we find it?

The answer is very simple: in the *Comedy* itself. The author would have no reason to point to the presence of a veiled teaching in his work if this teaching were to remain forever beyond our reach. Assuming he hoped to be fully understood by at least a few of his readers, he could not wrap himself in total silence, and assuming he sought to write for posterity as much as for his contemporaries,[76] he also could not dwell on matters which only people of his time could have no difficulty knowing about. His first duty was to provide us with all of the elements needed for an adequate interpretation of his poem, or, in the event he would not complete his thought, to omit nothing which an effort of reflection on our part could not supply.

Everything we know of the *Comedy* compels us to believe that it contains nothing superfluous and lacks nothing essential. It is itself "the great volume where both ink and paper are never changed"[77] and in which "no point can find its place by chance."[78] Whoever would study it completely must thus devote himself to a minute analysis of all its details, however insignificant they may seem. There is not one of these details that was included out of mere concern for embellishment or that could be removed without harming the intelligibility of the whole. As one critic observes, "Each new form of address, figure of speech, method of proof, scene or event is in itself purposive and subsumes, contributes to, or augments the effects of smaller, larger, and collateral divisions."[79] Even if we do not always immediately perceive the raison d'être of a particular character or structural element, we can assume that each is subject to an interpretation that harmonizes with the rest and can underline or qualify the meaning. The explanation we give of it will have value only to the extent that it is integrated into a view of the whole whose diverse parts illuminate and reinforce one another.

It follows from this that we cannot approach the *Comedy* as we do any other work and especially a modern work. More than ever, this is the moment to recall Dante's remarks on the close ties that bind the literal and the allegorical senses. These two senses, he says, are inseparable to the point that they could not exist or be understood without one another, like the material subject and the substantial form of Aristotelian theory.[80] If it is true that the words spoken by Dante or his characters have no meaning except in relation to their context, we will always have to ask if perchance they would not be ironic. But that is to make a complice of whoever perceives the irony or senses a gap between what the author says and what he meant to say. By concealing his thought and inviting the reader to find it by himself, Dante gets him to abandon his role of spectator and to take an active part in the drama being played out before him. He obliges him not only to make his own the thoughts that are presented to him, at least for the moment, but also to experience for himself the labor pangs that gave them birth.[81] Thus, what at the outset seemed a pleasant and more or less peaceful journey through the "other world" imagined by the poet risks at every turn becoming an adventure of the mind upon which, once begun, the reader feels he is engaged for better or for worse, without knowing in advance how far it will take him or whether he will still be the same once he has reached his destination.

## Notes

1 See the penetrating remarks of Martin Heidegger, *Nietzsche,* I, trans. David Farrell Krell (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1991), 77–79.

2 “It can be briefly stated that the end of the whole as of the part is to remove those living in this life from the state of misery and to lead them to the state of happiness.” *Letter to Cangrande,* 15, 39, in *Literary Criticism of Dante Alighieri,* trans. and ed. Robert S. Haller (Lincoln, Nebr.: University of Nebraska Press, 1973), 101–102. Subsequent citations from the *Letter to Cangrande* are taken from this translation.

3 See *Paradiso* 31, 37–39, 85.

4 “The third sense is called the moral, and it is this one which teachers should seek out with most diligence when going through texts, because of its usefulness to them and to their pupils” (*Convivio* II, 1, 5, in *The Banquet*, trans. Christopher Ryan, Stanford French and Italian Studies 61 [Saratoga, Calif.: Anima Libri, 1989], 43). Subsequent citations from *Convivio* are taken from this translation. See also *Letter to Cangrande*, 16, 40.

5 Dante, *Inferno* 1, 85. Virgil is referred to as “*maestro*” a hundred times in the *Comedy*.

6 Dante, *Inferno* 4, 80.

7 See Plato, *Republic* X, 595b, 600a–b; Xenophanes of Colophon, Diels fragment 10; and Henri Marrou, *History of Education in Antiquity*, trans. George Lamb (New York: New American Library, 1956), 21–34.

8 See Aristotle, *Poetics* 8, 1450a15–20.

9 See Dante, *Inferno* 13, 55–78.

10 See G. W. F. Hegel, *The Philosophy of History*, trans. J. Sibree (New York: Collier, 1902), 284.

11 See Dante, *Letter* VI, 2, 6–8, in *A Translation of Dante’s Letters*, trans. Charles S. Latham (Cambridge, Mass.: Riverside Press, 1891), 142–143.

12 See Dante, *Paradiso* 16, 46–154.

13 Dante, *Letter* VI, 2, 5.

14 See Dante, *Inferno* 1, 71–72.

15 Jean Pépin, *Dante et la tradition de l’allégorie,* Conference Albert le Grand 1969 (Montreal and Paris, 1970). Among other recent works, see also A. C. Charity, *Events and Their Afterlife: The Dialectics of Christian Typology in the Bible and Dante* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1966); and R. Hollander, *Allegory in Dante’s Commedia* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1969).

16 Dante, *Convivio* II, 1, 2–7.

17 Dante, *Convivio* II, 1, 3. An unfortunate lacuna in the received text deprives us of the definition of the literal sense Dante would have given at this point. We follow the restitution by E. G. Parodi, adopted by G. Busnelli and G. Vandelli eds., *Convivio,* I (Florence: F. Le Monnier, 1964) 96–97.

18 Dante had intended to examine, in the next to the last book of the *Convivio,* the reasons that had led sages to employ allegory as a means of dissimulation. See Dante, Convivio II, 1, 4. See also the remarks of Boccaccio, *The Life of Dante*, ch. 9, in *The Earliest Lives of Dante*, trans. James Robinson Smith (New York: Ungar, 1963).

19 See Dante, *Convivio* II, 1, 6, in which Dante discusses the anagogical sense rather than the allegorical sense strictly speaking.

20 “To be sure, we must not suppose that all the events in the narrative are symbolical; but those which have no symbolism are interwoven in the story for the sake of those which have this further significance. For it is only the share of the plough that cuts through the earth; but the other parts of the plough are essential to make this operation possible.” Augustine, *The City of God* XVI, 2, quoted in Dante, *Monarchy* III,

4, 7.

21 Dante, *Convivio* II, 1, 4.

22 See Dante, *Convivio* II, 1, 12. See Jean Pépin, *Dante et la tradition*, 89–95.

23 “In bringing out this meaning, the literal sense should always come first, it being the meaning in which the others are contained and without which it would be impossible and irrational to come to an understanding of the others, particularly the allegorical” (Dante, *Convivio* II, 1, 8).

24 “It is impossible to come to the inside without first coming to the outside” (Dante, *Convivio* II, 1, 9).

25 On this etymology and its antecedents, see Pépin, *Dante et la tradition*, 11, n. 1; 46, n. 60; 61; 88–89. On the controversies concerning the Letter’s authenticity, which is widely acknowledged today, see Hollander, *Allegory*, 40–42, and the bibliography cited therein.

26 See Dante, *Letter to Cangrande*, 7, 21.

27 Dante, *Letter to Cangrande,* 8, 23–25.

28 See the amusing remarks of Étienne Gilson, *Dante the Philosopher*, trans. David Moore (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1963), 1–50. Gilson reviews the various metamorphoses of Beatrice as the symbol of theology, baptism, tonsure, minor orders, the priestly vocation, the bishop of Florence, the ideal woman, agent intellect, the light of glory, and many other things besides. The same is the case with Matilda, the allegorical interpretations of whom are no fewer nor less studied: the active life, love of the Church, the principle of monarchy, philosophy reconciled with theology, docility, Christian doctrine, active mysticism, innocence, the perfection of human nature, earthly happiness, and so on.

29

> But the kind of allegory to which the example from Scriptures given in the *Letter to Can Grande* points is not an allegory of “this for that,” but an allegory of “this and that,” of this sense plus that sense. The verse in Scripture which says “When Israel went out of Egypt” has its first meaning in denoting a real historical event; and it has its second meaning because that historical event itself, having the Author that it had, can signify yet another event: our Redemption through Christ. Its first meaning is a meaning in *verbis*; its other meaning is a meaning in *facto*, in the event itself. The words have a real meaning in pointing to a real event; the event, in its turn, has meaning because events wrought by God are themselves as words yielding a meaning, a higher and spiritual sense. (Charles S. Singleton, *Dante Studies I: Commedia, Elements of Structure* [Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1954], 89 also 1–17)

30 See Singleton, *Dante Studies I*, 71, 92–93; and Pépin, *Dante et la tradition*, 74–82.

31 See Singleton, *Dante Studies I*, 91. Singleton cites as an example Virgil, to whom the *Comedy* occasionally gives a second sense without robbing him of his identity as a real or historical character.

32 See Erich Auerbach, “Figura,” in *Scenes from the Drama of European Literature*, trans. Ralph Manheim (New York: Meridian Books, 1959), 11–76; and R. Hollander, *Allegory* , 48–56.

33 See Machiavelli, “Discorso intorno alia nostra lingua,” *Tutte le opere di Niccolð Machiavelli*, II, ed. P. Flora and C. Cordié (Milan: A. Mandadori, 1960), 809.

34 Singleton himself has to acknowledge that the first two cantos of *Inferno,* which serve as a prologue to the *Comedy* as a whole, belong to another literary genre and are not historical in the same way as the rest of the poem. See *Dante Studies I*, 7, 9–10, 13, 93 n. 3.

35 Dante, *Letter to Cangrande*, 9, 27.

36 Dante, *Letter to Cangrande*, 10, 29.

37 See *Inferno* 2, 7–9; *Purgatorio* 1, 7–12; 29, 37–42; and *Paradiso* 1, 13–36; 18, 82–87; 23, 55–57.

38 “And although these mystical senses are called by various names, they may all be called allegorical, since they are all different from the literal or historical” (Dante, *Letter to Cangrande,* 7, 22).

39

> A poet has not God’s power and may not presume to write as He can. But he may imitate God’s way of writing. . . . How can Dante pretend to knowledge of the state of souls after death? In the same way that the author of Genesis has knowledge of the creation. He was probably unreflective about his myth and we have seen that Dante was reflective. But even Dante in his reasoned letter to Can Grande neglects the *how* of it. . . . And so, if we go beyond analogies, we shall have to answer that this is faith writing. (Singleton, *Dante Studies I*, 15, 80).

According to Singleton, if the allegory of the *Comedy* were that of the poets, the literal sense, being but a fiction, would always have to have another sense, which is not the case. See *Dante Studies I*, 90. One could reply there is no reason to think it might be otherwise. Singleton’s argument rests on the passage in Monarchy in which Dante, following St. Augustine, insists on the idea that one does not need to give a spiritual or hidden meaning to each and every event narrated in the Bible (see *Monarchy* III, 4, 7). But this holds only for the sacred text and Dante’s remark appears to have a limited application. It is above all a reaction to the use of biblical allegory to extend the rights of the papacy at the expense of the imperial power. See Thomas M. Jones, *The Becket Controversy*, 18 n. 4.

40

> It is not fitting, however, that we, who have been given knowledge in ourselves of what is best, follow the tracks of the herd; we are rather obligated to meet their errors head on. For those who live according to intellect and reason, and those who are endowed with a certain divine liberty, are not restricted by precedent. And this is not surprising, since the laws are guided by them, not they by the laws. (Dante, Letter to *Cangrande,* 2, 7)

41 See Dante, *Convivio* II, 1, 3; and the remarks of P. Guiberteau in his translation of the *Convivio, Le Banquet* (Paris: Les Belles lettres, 1968), 107.

42 Dante, *Convivio* II, 1, 5.

43 Dante, *Letter to Cangrande,* 16, 40.

44 Dante, *Convivio* II, 1, 7; and see *Letter to Cangrande,* 7, 21.

45 The possibility of a third type of allegory, Dante’s own, is touched upon briefly by B. Stambler:

> We may at least consider another possibility, a third kind of allegory. This third kind (shall we call it “allegory of Dante”?) might be defined as one in which the literal sense is consciously a fiction, but a fiction about things believed to be essentially as therein presented—a belief on which is based all the faith, hope, and intelligence of the poet. (*Dante’s Other World* [New York: New York University Press, 1957], 69)

46 See G. Boccaccio, *Life of Dante*, 2. Dante calls himself “*vir philosophiae domesticus*” in *Letter XII*, 3, 6. C. Singleton denies the specifically philosophical character of Dante’s thought:

> Dante is no philosopher and quite readily admitted as much. . . . And yet Dante had a philosophy. We quite properly call him a philosophical poet. Only, of course, it is not his philosophy as Plato's is Plato's. With Dante philosophy is also faith; is first of all faith, well buttressed with authority and shared by most of the Western world of his time. (*Dante Studies* I, 64–65)

47 See Boccaccio, *Life*, 8.

48 Boccaccio, *Life*, 17.

49 See Boccaccio, *Life*, 17.

50 Boccaccio, *Life*, 9. Boccaccio here borrows a metaphor of Pope Gregory:

> who said of the sacred Scripture what may also be said of poetry, namely, that in the same account it discloses the text and its underlying mystery. Thus at the same moment by the one it disciplines the wise, and by the other it strengthens the foolish. It possesses openly that by virtue of which it may nourish little children, and preserves in secret that whereby it holds rapt in admiration, the minds of sublime thinkers.

51 Boccaccio, *Life*, 9. For a more complete and very helpful discussion of the same question, see G. Boccaccio, *Esposizioni sopra la Comedia di Dante*, 1 (1) (Milan: A Mondadori, 1965), *69*–77.

52 "For studies so many and so excellent he deservedly won the highest titles, and while he lived some ever called him poet, others philosopher, and many theologian." Boccaccio, *Life*, 2, 17. See also Benvenuto da Imola: "*Ab aliquibus vocabatur poeta*, *ab aliis philosophus, ab aliis theologus" (Comentum super Dantis Comoediam*, introduction, ed. J. P. Lacaita [Florence: G. Barbera, 1887], vol. 1, 9).

53 On the distinction between Dante as pilgrim and Dante as author, see F. Fergusson, *Dante's Drama of the Mind* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1953), 8–10.

54 "O you, possessed of sturdy intellects, observe the teaching that is hidden here beneath the veil of verses so obscure" (Dante, *Inferno* 9, 61–63).

55 See P. Renucci, *Dante disciple et juge du monde gréco-latin* (Paris: Les Belles lettres, 1954), 216, 223–225; and J. Frecccero, "Medusa: The Letter and The Spirit," in *The Poetics of Conversion* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1986), 119–135.

56 See Dante, *Purgatorio* 8, 19–21.

57 See E. Auerbach, "Dante's Addresses to the Reader," in *American Critical Essays on* '*The Divine Comedy*,' ed. Robert J. Clements (New York: New York University Press, 1967). 37–51; R. Hollander, *Allegory in Dante's Commedia,* 146–248; and C. Singleton, "In Exitu Israel de Aegypto," in *Dante: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. J. Freccero (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1965), 116–117.

58 Dante, *Paradiso* 2, 1–6.

59 Dante, *Paradiso* 13, 121–123.

60 Dante, *Paradiso* 23, 68–69.

61 Dante, *Paradiso* 10, 22–24.

62 Dante, *Paradiso* 13, 112–114.

63 See Dante, *Paradiso* 15, 54; 25, 49–50; 33, 15.

64 See Dante, *Paradiso* 10, 74–75.

65 Dante, *Inferno* 3, 1–6.

66 Dante, *Letter to Cangrande*, 15, 39.

67 Dante, *Purgatorio* 9, 124–126.

68 Dante, *Purgatorio* 9, 119–120.

69 Dante, *Purgatorio* 9, 70–72.

70 For a similar image, see Maimonides, *Guide of the Perplexed* I, introduction, 7b: “a saying uttered with a view to two meanings is like an apple overlaid with silver filigree-work having very small holes... the external meaning ought to be as beautiful as silver, while its internal meaning ought to be more beautiful than the exterrnal one.” See Proverbs 15.11. Maimonides also compares his own book to a door than can be opened only if one possesses the key; see *Guide*, 12a.

71 Dante, *Paradiso* 2, 10–15.

72

> It becomes the purpose of the following chapters to retrace that pattern (i.e., of the soul’s conversion from sin to grace) as established in the theology of Dante’s day. What we have to realize here is something which applies generally to Dante’s poem in all respects: *the poet did not invent the doctrine*. The shape of his poem is determined by the truth which it must bear and disclose in its structure, and that truth is not original with the poet. Dante sees as poet and realizes as poet what is already conceptually elaborated and established in Christian doctrine. (C. Singleton, *Dante Studies II: Journey to Beatrice* [Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1958], 7)

See L. Pietrobono, “Dante,” in *Enciclopedia cattolica* IV (Florence, 1950) col. 1172: *“In tutta la sua opera, non una parola, non una frase che valga a incriminarne la cristallina orto-dossia.”* Dante’s orthodoxy is taken for granted by many critics who find the presuppositions of medieval theology “too distant” to interest the modern reader. See D. S. Carne-Ross, *“Dante Agonistes,”* in *The New York Review of Books* 22, 7 (May 1, 1975), 3–8.

73 See Dante, *Letter to Cangrande*, 28, 80.

74 Dante, *Paradiso* 2, 7.

75 “Dante’s greatest differences with the Church are on the practical fringe of theology, in the realm of the secular activities or ambitions of the papacy and of others of the higher clergy” (B. Stambler, *Dante’s Other World*, 23).

76 See, for example, Dante, *Inferno* 16, 129; *Paradiso* 17, 98–99, 118–120; 33, 70–72.

77 Dante, *Paradiso* 15, 50–51.

78 Dante, *Paradiso* 32, 53.

79 R. S. Haller, ed., *Literary Criticism of Dante Alighieri* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1973), xxxix–xl.

80 See Dante, *Convivio* II, 1, 10–11.

81 See, for example, Dante, *Purgatorio* 17, 138–139; and *Paradiso* 2, 124–126; 5, 112; 10, 25; 11, 133–135; 19, 134–136; 28, 62–63; 29, 68–69.

# CHAPTER FIVE

## *The Imperialism of the Comedy*

### The Philosopher and Political Life

One does not need to be intimately acquainted with Dante's work to notice that he gave political philosophy a privileged place among the human sciences. He spoke of it repeatedly, with such insistence as would seem excessive had he not explained at length the reasons why he thought it indispensable. As we have seen, it was for him the master discipline, too long forgotten, which more than any other taught men how to live well, a kind of first philosophy that could provide the desired remedy for the ills that ravaged medieval Christendom.[1]

Does this mean that Dante never thought of any other blessings apart from the ones brought by political life? To think that he did would be to set aside a whole side of his thought whose importance only grows as we go more deeply. The majority of men cannot do without life in society and have no needs beyond what it provides, but there will always be a small number of elect enamored of a higher happiness that is defined not by moral action but by theoretical knowledge and the complete detachment from worldly goods it demands. The Letter to a Florentine friend reveals another Dante, very close to the Dante of the *Comedy*, who, in order to be happy, does not need to return to a homeland that would only welcome him under conditions he found ignoble.[2] Was it not possible for him to "look upon the face of the sun and the stars everywhere" or to "meditate anywhere under the heavens upon the sweetest truths"?[3] In exile a "new way" was opened to him that led to his goal without his having to betray his honor or his reputation.

Not only Florence, but in the end the earthly globe itself makes the pilgrim smile and seems paltry to him when, from the eighth heaven, he looks down upon it from afar:

> My eyes returned through all the seven spheres
> and saw this globe in such a way that I
> smiled at its scrawny image: I approve
> that judgment as the best, which holds this earth
> to be the least; and he whose thoughts are set
> elsewhere, can truly be called virtuous.[4]

The earth promises only human happiness, which often misleads.[5] In taking stock of its limitations, man succeeds in surpassing himself, in passing beyond the human, "*trasumanar*," as the neologism of the *Comedy* puts it.[6] He discovers within himself a life that is more divine than human.[7]

It is one thing to know this philosophic ideal, but to live it is another matter. On this point practical considerations will once again take precedence. Such is the conclusion one draws from the story of Ulysses, for whom Dante invents a new fate that makes him resemble the poet more than the hero of the legend. After overcoming "a hundred thousand dangers,"[8] Ulysses finally came to what was to be the end of his long voyage. But, instead of returning to Ithaca, Ulysses goes off toward the "world that is unpeopled" that lies where the sun sets, beyond the boundaries of the West.[9] Neither fondness for his son nor pity for his old father nor the love he owed Penelope, which would have gladdened her, could quench his longing "to gain experience of the world and of the vices and the worth of men."[10] His only companions are a handful of faithful friends already grown old, whom he exhorts by reminding them of their origin or seed: "You were not made to live your lives as brutes, but to be followers of worth and knowledge."[11] The venture ends badly, however; just when they see in the distance a high mountain, which commentators usually take to be

Mount Purgatory, a whirlwind arises and causes the ship to sink.

The lesson is worth noting. Whether he likes it or not, the thinker can never dissociate himself completely from his social milieu. He does not attain truth by escaping society, but by facing it and transcending it. Ulysses's "wild flight"[12] only ends in failure; Dante will be careful not to imitate him. He will first have to go to the depth of hell before undertaking the slow ascent that leads to the "godly realm"[13] to which his steps take him. Only once he has "seen everything"[14] and penetrated to the root of the evil that afflicted his time will he have any hope of success. There is no direct route to the desired end. Even though he has lost all attraction for the goods of this world, the philosopher is not free to turn his back on political philosophy, that is, the part of philosophy that has most to do with human things.

## Dante's Political Itinerary

The problem as we have sketched it was already familiar, but it took on a new twist from the fact that medieval society was ordered not by one sole power as was the case with ancient society, but by two powers, one spiritual and the other temporal, whose rapports still evoked lively discussions from the viewpoints of both the Church and the civil authorities. This question at all cost had to be resolved in order to put an end to the conflicts that exercized men's minds, and it was this question that absorbed Dante's attention in great part. His thinking on the matter is known to us through two works, the *Monarchy* and the *Comedy*, yet between their teachings many historians have detected important differences.

The *Monarchy* is a fervent plea for the autonomy of the Roman emperor in the temporal domain. It is directed chiefly to the theory of Boniface VIII, whose *Unam Sanctam* of 1302 called for the total submission of princes to the sovereign pontiff and so brought to its logical outcome the doctrine of the plenitude of papal power (*plenitudo potestatis*) that had developed gradually since the ninth century and especially since the time of Gregory VII.[15]

Boniface's document in fact did not introduce any new element to the debate. Its import lies rather in that it presents itself not as a decree, nor a decretal, nor even as a bull, though it is usually referred to as such, but as a doctrinal declaration of a kind that was rare until then and whose intent, it seems, was to react against the decentralizing tendencies that were emerging within Christendom.[16] The presentation draws, according to custom, on the old theory of the two swords, the symbols of the dual authority that divine providence had endowed the human race. According to Boniface, these swords, once entrusted to the apostles, are both in the hands of the Church, which, as repository of revealed truth and grace, retains the power to use them as seems good to her.[17] In the hierarchical order established by God, temporal authority is thus by its nature subordinated to ecclesiastical authority, which has the right to oversee it and to depose it if it ever fails in its duties. The Church is the judge of all and is itself judged by no one, save God. Boniface, of course, does not go so far as to state as such that temporal authority is created by the Church, but it is clear that he regards it as at least conferred by it. The prince thus has no other power than the one that is delegated to him by the Church, and he exercizes it only "at the will and suffrance of the priest."[18] Ultimately the two authorities are but one, for there is no area of human life that is not the domain of the Church and with which it could not concern itself if it wished to do so, although in principle the Church prefers to have recourse to the secular arm for certain kinds of business that do not befit clerics such as the waging of war and punishing of criminals.[19] The upshot of this theory is that every human being is subject, under pain of damnation, to the authority of the Roman pontiff, as *Unam Sanctam* concludes: "Therefore we declare, state, define, and pronounce that it is altogether necessary to salvation for every human creature to be subject to the Roman Pontiff."[20]

Although in this case we may not know all the motives that led Boniface to publish this document, it has to be said that the conclusions it articulates go well beyond the biblical and historical foundations on which it claims to rest. Dante has no more pressing concern than to show that the emperor receives his authority directly from God and that consequently he exercises it by his own sovereign right and not in the name of the Church.[21] His argument begins from the principle that man has two ends: one natural and the other supernatural. The knowledge required for him to attain them comes to him through two bodies endowed for this purpose by divine wisdom: the imperial authority and the Church. The first leads to happiness in this world through philosophical instruction, the second to eternal happiness through spiritual teaching.[22] The big question is to find out how these two powers are related, and on this thorny question the *Monarchy* in the final analysis remains vague. Chapter 11 of Book III says only that the two cannot be dealt with either as subordinated one to the other or as equal members of the same species since the papacy and the imperial government (which Dante designates by the novel word *imperiatus,* no doubt to underline its special character) are rooted in two different and irreducible orders: one of paternity and the other of sovereignty. There remains only one solution: they are united in a common dependence either on God

Himself “or else under some substance lower than God, but including in its particular being all those whose particular form of being it is to be superiors.”[23] However, it is not clear how in practice such a principle could ensure their harmonious collaboration or resolve potential conflicts between them. The conclusion of the treatise merely states that, since happiness in this life is linked to happiness in the next, the Roman emperor is always in some ways subject to the Roman pontiff and always owes to him “the piety which a first-born son owes to his father.”[24]

Based on this declaration, Michele Barbi concluded that, in spite of its novelty and his fierce opposition to Boniface’s demands, Dante’s thought remains fundamentally Christian and conforms with what he elaborated later in the *Comedy*.[25] Barbi rejects the thesis of Bruno Nardi, for whom the final words of the treatise are not to be taken at face value but as an ironic concession to contemporary taste.[26] According to Nardi, it is hardly conceivable that Dante would have taken such pains in calling for the independence of temporal power and then turn around at the last moment and in one sentence destroy the whole thrust of his argument. The *Monarchy* is not content to distinguish the two powers; it separates them radically. Therein lies its great originality. But there is more, for, once it is admitted that the temporal authority is not subject to control by ecclesiastical authority, one must recognize that in turn philosophy, on which it is founded, is not subject to control by divine revelation. The teaching of the *Monarchy* is thus akin to what is known as Averroism and accordingly is not orthodox at all.[27] For good reason Dante would have abandoned this teaching in the *Comedy*, which consequently must be read as a tacit but unquestionable repudiation of the ideas he still held at the time he was writing his treatise.[28]

A few years later, Étienne Gilson sought to assess the situation and maintained that the *Monarchy* is neither as traditional nor as revolutionary as it had been thought to be. He acknowledges that the emancipation of the temporal domain from the spiritual domain logically entails the emancipation of philosophy from revealed truth, and he is equally persuaded that “the doctrine of the separateness of the orders which Dante upheld is quite in accordance with the spirit of Averroism,”[29] but it seems to him unthinkable that Dante himself would have drawn from his premises such a bold conclusion as Nardi imputes to him. Dante never subscribed to “the Averroistic thesis of the unity of the intellect and the eternity of the human race,”[30] and, like St. Thomas, he always believed firmly in the perfect harmony of reason and faith.[31] That is enough to absolve him of any suspicion of heresy. But if his attitude toward philosophy presupposes the existence of Thomism, it is nevertheless not identical to it.[32] “When Saint Thomas distinguishes and ranks the orders his purpose is to unite them; Dante separates the orders in the hope of reconciling them,”[33] without taking into account that such an accord requires, as its essential condition, the magisterium of theology over philosophy as well as of the Church over the Empire.

Gilson’s compromise received support from several historians, who nonetheless continued to see a profound discrepancy between the *Monarchy* and the *Comedy*. Thus, according to A. P. d’Entrèves, Dante’s itinerary consists of three successive stages in which the poet at first was interested exclusively in the city, then embraced the idea of empire (*Convivio, Monarchy*), and finally went on to the strictly religious solution that the *Comedy* brings to the great political problem of the Middle Ages.[34] The opposition between the *Monarchy* and the *Comedy* is accentuated even more forcefully by J. Goudet, for whom the latter work marks a regression that falls back upon a unitary conception of society which practically annuls all of the social and economic advances attained in the course of the century preceding its composition. [35] Dante, who had been in the vanguard of the intellectual and political movement of his time, in the end revealed himself to be a reactionary or a traditionalist, desperately struggling for the restoration of an ideal that was by then outdated and consigned to oblivion by the inexorable march of events.[36]

Did Dante retract in the *Comedy* and did he truly renounce the position to which he inclined not long before, when he was finishing the *Monarchy* and already taken up with composing his poem? This is not a simple question to answer, but upon examination the distance that separates the two works may in the end seem less than it is ordinarily thought to be, from the viewpoint of both their moral teaching and their political ideas.

## The Rational Ethic of *Purgatorio*

Of the three parts of the *Comedy*, none has a frankly more rational character than *Purgatorio.* Not that it is lacking in religious language; as everywhere else it lies in wait at every turn, but almost always in such a way as to raise new doubts on its import. The pilgrim has now to undergo the moral purgation that is the prelude to his entry into paradise, for only once he is completely regenerated can he be initiated to the splendors of the heavenly court.[37] Nonetheless, a careful analysis reveals that the tenor of this regeneration is generally more natural than supernatural and more philosophical than penitential.

The first canto places this “second kingdom” under the aegis of the pagan Cato, whose forehead shines with the rays of four stars, figures of the moral order and the virtues that epitomize it.[38] These stars, we learn, have been seen by no one “except by the first people,”[39] which we should take to mean the first people of the *Comedy*, that is, the poets, heroes, and philosophers gathered in the first circle of *Inferno*, unless one imagines that the word “people” can apply to Adam and Eve,[40] which does not seem very plausible. Since they lived before the coming of Christ, these pagans knew no other virtues than those that are commonly characterized as natural, and they were guided by these virtues alone.[41] Yet it seems that these are the very vritues that Dante must acquire now that he has come to this point in his journey.

Indeed, it has perhaps not always been noted sufficiently that his own purification bears only a faint resemblance to that of the devout souls he encounters along the way. To convey his thought more concretely, the poet employs, as he had done previously, a sort of *lex talionis,* which the *Comedy* calls *contrapasso*[42] and which calls for a compensation that is not only the equal of the fault committed but also of the same nature. The prideful are bent over against the ground under a heavy burden, their chests next to their knees, “like the imperfect grub, the worm before it has attained its final form.”[43] The envious have their eyelids sewn with an iron thread, such that they can see nothing of what goes on around them.[44] The wrathful have their gaze shrouded by dense black smoke that prevents them from seeing things as they are.[45] The avaricious have their hands and feet tied and remain motionless, their heads bowed downward.[46] The same obtains among other categories of sinners: the slothful, whose pace is now quickened;[47] the gluttonous, who are now emaciated;[48] the lustful, who expiate their culpable passions in fire.[49] Their punishments are lighter than those of the damned in hell and they accept them willingly,[50] but they are no less subject to the pains of repentance, accomplishing genuine mortifications by which they merit their redemption.

Altogether different is the condition of the pilgrim, who does not have to subject himself to such a discipline to work out his salvation. His righting does not entail obedience to any law whatever and he does not rid himself of his evil inclinations by doing penance himself. There is no doubt that he knows how to humble himself among the humble and is quick to bend toward them to speak with them.[51] He shows himself equally filled with delicacy and compassion for the envious once he perceives that he seems to be insulting them when gazing on them while remaining unseen.[52] But it is not by bending to the ground, closing his eyes, or running with the slothful that he overcomes his pride, envy, or sloth. Healing comes rather through an effort of reflection that reveals to him the folly rather than the malice of such behavior. Thus, earthly glory is too ephemeral to be attached to it beyond measure or to be proud of it. It “wears the color of the grass that comes and goes; the sun that makes it wither first drew it from the ground, still green and tender.”[53] Guinizelli believed himself to be the best of poets; nevertheless his fame paled before the brilliance of his successor, Cavalcanti, and who knows whether some day both will not be surpassed by one yet greater, for “he perhaps is born who will chase both out of the nest.”[54] The reader thinks spontaneously of Dante, whose fame would surely eclipse his predecessors’. This is just what he himself implies, with finesse and without excessive humility, [55] but also without altering anything of the lesson that is being taught. Let us note parenthetically that Dante is alone with Virgil in contemplating the scenes of pride and humility carved in relief on the marble wall that surrounds the enclosure.[56] The penitents who are bent over cannot see them. They are incited to the practice of humility, not to a meditation on the irrationality of pride of the sort to which the poet gives himself.

The same is the case with the other vices, when the contrast between the intellectual approach of the pilgrim and the moral behavior of the aggrieved penitents is no less accentuated. The envious, saddened by the happiness of others and rejoicing at their misfortune, displays a deranged mind by coveting goods that are diminished when they are shared.[57] He would be happier if, instead of looking at the ground, he would raise his eyes toward heaven, which calls out “and lets [you] see its never-ending beauties.”[58] The wrathful does himself harm by allowing himself to be blinded by a passion that his overexcited imagination continuously feeds.[59] The slothful deprives himself of the greatest goods by giving in to idleness; to shed his lethargy he has only to hear Virgil’s philosophic discourse on love and what gives rise to it.[60] The gluttonous and the lustful are thoroughly mistaken when they indulge without measure in the pursuit of pleasures that will never satisfy them and will someday have to renounce.[61] In each instance the sin is conceived less as an offense against God than as a disorder of the mind or a simple error of judgment.[62] Thus Dante’s victory over sin is always rooted in knowledge, as though every moral virtue were in the end reducible to intellectual virtue.

It has sometimes been said that the angel who holds the keys to Purgatory represents the Church, to which the pilgrim must submit before proceeding further.[63] As we have seen, however, these keys, which are destined to open for us the secrets of the poem, are not necessarily the keys of religious authority. In

fact, Dante does not receive any of the sacraments and nowhere submits to the rites by which sacraments are normally conferred. When he comes to recognize his guilt, he does so in a manner that compromises him so little that commentators are forever asking just what he is confessing.[64] His one fault is to have allowed himself to be distracted by present things (*"le presenti cose"*) and to have abandoned all hope for the good beyond all other goods, which in the context could just as well be understood as a reference to his political setbacks.[65] To be reborn, he will only have to cross the Lethe and Eunoe, the two rivers whose pagan names hardly evoke the idea of baptismal regeneration.[66] Everything unfolds as if he did not have to go through the intermediary of the Church, outside which, Boniface VIII declared, "there is no salvation or remission of sins."[67] However one sees it, Dante's initiation remains strictly "para-ecclesiastical" and "para-liturgical."[68]

The *Monarchy* had earlier pointed out that Eden, where the pilgrim finds himself at this point, was a figure of the natural order and, more precisely, of the happiness that man can expect from the practice of the virtues proper to his nature.[69] There also one finds again the four moral virtues, which were highlighted in the opening canto, in the form of nymphs clothed in imperial purple and accompanied this time by the three theological virtues, to which they are juxtaposed, without it being possible to say precisely how the two groups are ordered in relation to one another.[70] In this same Eden Dante, forgetting past evil and remembering only the good, comes into possession of what the *Comedy* not long after calls nature pure and good, "*natura sincera e buona*,"[71] as it existed in the beginning, before the intrusion of the disorder introduced by man. He becomes, as Kantorowicz has aptly remarked, "a member, not of the *'corpus mysticum quod est ecclesia,'* but of the *'corpus mysticum Adae quod est humanitas,'"* a kind of *Adam subtilis* who embodies the natural perfection of his species.[72] Thus Virgil, in his final words, can say that he crowns him emperor and pope over himself: "*te sovra te corono e mitrio.*"[73] Imperial government and ecclesiastical authority have no other function than to guide man to the happiness that his evil inclinations ordinarily prevent him from attaining.[74] At last he delights in the spiritual freedom of which Cato was the image par excellence, but without having purchased it at the cost of his life.[75] Dante himself has no further need of either the one or the other. The perspective established in the Monarchy so far appears to have undergone no substantial change whatsoever.

### The *Comedy* and the Papacy

One comes to the same conclusion in passing from the ethical to the political domain. The problem that concerns us here arises in the very first scene of the poem, which shows Dante lost in a dark forest, just barely come to himself and attempting to climb a mountain whose shoulders are bathed by the rays of sun.[76] His efforts are contravened by the sudden appearance of three wild beasts, a leopard, a lion, and a wolf, which bar his way and force him to turn back. The leopard "covered with a spotted hide"[77] has long been seen as the image of Florence and its two political parties, the Whites and the Blacks, who were then rivals for the control of the city. The lion and the wolf may be taken to symbolize, as they usually are, the king of France and Rome or the papacy, the two foreign powers that were the most closely entwined in the internal affairs of Florence. The text purposely associates them as partners of some sort in a series of intrigues that was to end in the triumph of the Blacks, who were more open to the influence of the Holy See, over the Whites, who were more inclined to join with the emperor.[78] Dante has "good cause for hopefulness"[79] on seeing the leopard with its speckled skin, but he is gripped with fear at the sight of the wolf and "abandoned hope of ever climbing up that mountain slope."[80] Virgil then emerges to tell him that if he wishes to escape this dangerous place he must take "another path," for the beast that causes him the most fear, that is, the famished wolf, "allows no man to pass along her track, but blocks him even to the point of death."[81]

What follows in the *Inferno* is nothing else than a detailed analysis of the situation in Italy and in Florence since about the middle of the thirteenth century and a barely camouflaged account of the salient events in the life of the poet. The cause of the innumerable woes the reader witnesses will be examined at great length and in great detail in the *Purgatorio* with the help of data borrowed, here again, much more from Aristotle's philosophy than Christian theology. As canto 16, the climax of this whole section, explains, men should not ascribe the disorders to which they fall victim to chance or to their stars; they are themselves responsible for them. Only the practice of the virtues could restore their health. The principle of the virtues was placed in them at birth, but it will bear fruit only if their free will trains itself.[82] The fact that there are so few virtuous people in the world is not because human nature is vitiated but because the world is badly governed.[83] The laws are always there and they are good. The sad thing is that there is no longer anyone to make them observed and to punish wrongdoers.[84] The last emperor was Frederick II,[85] who died excommunicated in 1250. His successors, whom the *Comedy* gathers in the valley of the princes, were emperors in name only. Either they were never invested, or they did not rise to the height of their task. We

see them all idle or preoccupied with their own well-being rather than their subjects'.[86] Everyone feels the conseuqences, as Sordello laments: "Ah, abject Italy, you inn of sorrows, you ship without a helmsman in harsh seas, no queen of provinces but of bordellos!"[87]

The problem, however, has deeper roots, for if the princes no longer govern and do not even have the possibility of governing, it is in large part because of the interference of the papacy in the temporal domain. The world formerly had the good fortune of being ruled by "two suns," the pope and the emperor.[88] By monopolizing power, the first has usurped the latter's and "fouls itself and its new burden."[89] Of all the vices plaguing human life, none is more widespread than avarice and none to which the Church is more prone because of its material insufficiency.[90] Rome's habit of forging political alliances for its own aggrandizement has the double effect of giving a bad example to its own followers and of neutralizing any effort which the temporal power could make to moderate its subjects' worldly ambitions.[91] It is no wonder, then, that valor and courtesy have vanished and the West, "stripped utterly of every virtue,"[92] has gone downhill.

Just as the cause of the current degeneracy is not original sin but bad government, so the remedy is not to be found in divine grace but in the return to wholesome political life. Nothing obviously prevents preaching the observance of the ancient virtues of courage and moderation, to which the *Comedy* exhorts in many places. But since persuasion does not succeed with everyone, it is necessary to add the support of some public authority which knows how to make recalcitrants behave properly. On this point the *Monarchy* brought a much more precise solution. It recommended the reestablishment of a universal monarchy whose task would be to ensure peace among the different nations of the world and establish the reign of justice and liberty. [93] It does not seem that the situation envisaged in the *Comedy* has changed much. Such at least is the impression one gathers from the many passages that deal with the papacy and in particular with Boniface VIII, "the prince of the new Pharisees,"[94] whom Dante always saw as a "usurper" whose enemies were all Christians, who had no respect for either his holy orders or his pontifical dignity, who prided himself on opening and closing the gates of hell to anyone,[95] and who himself deserved the worst punishments.[96]

What Dante thought of his adversary is nowhere to be seen better than in the portrait he sketches at the beginning of canto 17 of the *Inferno*, in which we see appear Geryon, the fabulous beast on whose shoulders Dante and Virgil pass from the seventh to the eighth circle of hell. The monster is invested with the most extraordinary features: he crosses mountains, pierces the thickest walls, destroys powerful armies, and afflicts the whole world.[97] What does he represent? Fraud perhaps, as the text suggests in speaking of him as a "filthy effigy of fraud."[98] Sins of fraud are in fact punished in the infamous Malebolge the two travelers are about to enter. But the author seems to have something else in mind. If there is any institution in the Middle Ages whose power penetrates everywhere, shatters weapons and fortresses, and makes itself felt beyond mountains, it is the Church. Could it be that in the monster's features Dante sought to depict the abomination that the medieval papacy had become for him? We are here in the realm of pure conjecture, at least until further details attract our attention.

The Geryon of classical mythology, known to us above all through Virgil, Ovid, and Horace, was ordinarily conceived as a giant with three heads and three bodies, though the description varies slightly form one author to another.[99] Dante simplifies the depiction by giving the Geryon one body, surmounted by a human head. At first only the face and bust are visible; the rest of the body, which is that of a reptile, has not yet come to rest on the bank.[100] The text adds that his look was "benign," his two paws had "hair up to the armpits," and his back, belly, and flanks were marked with "knots" and "circle":

*La faccia sua era faccia d'uom giusto,*

*tanto benigna avea de fuor la pelle,*
*e du'un serente tutto l'altro fusto;*

*due branche avea pilose insin l'ascelle;*

*lo dosso e 'l petto e ambedue cose*
*dipinti avea di nodi e di rotelle.*

[The face he wore was of a just man,

so gracious was his features' outer semblance;
and all his trunk, the body of a serpent;

he had two paws, with hair up to the armpits;

his back and chest as well as both his flanks
had been adorned with twining knots and circlets.][101]

Why all this detail? We can see once it occurs to us to join two words that belong together but that Dante cautiously separated with an interpolated clause, *faccia* and *benigna,* or, to put it more clearly, *benigna faccia* —"Boniface," the "serpent" who according to the author had only the name and the appearance of goodness but all the rest of whom was only fraud, avarice, and disguised cruelty.[102] Once this is understood, there is no mistaking the description of the animal's body, which recalls very nicely the papal vestments of the time, the sleeves of which were covered with ermine and the sides decorated with knotted strips and medallions. As though by chance, the author had just before this spoken of his poem for the first time as a "comedy."[103] The scene that follows, one has to admit, is consummately comic.

Many other data would confirm this conclusion if need be. The end of the preceding canto aimed at putting the reader on the alert by reminding him how one must be prudent in the presence of those who not only see what we are doing but who also read our thoughts.[104] Faced with a truth which seems a lie, to avoid giving rise to unmerited reproaches Dante will "close his lips as long as he can."[105] But then the Geryon surfaces from the abyss, like a diver coming up to the surface of the sea after plunging into the depths to loosen an anchor caught on a rock:

*si come torna colui che va giuso*

*talora a solver l'ancora ch'aggrappa*
*o scoglio o altro che nel mare e chiuso,*

*che'n su si sende e da pie si rattrappa.*

[like one returning from the waves where he

went down to loose an anchor snagged upon
a reef or something else hid in the sea,

who streches upward and draws in his feet.][106]

The reader who is not content to observe Dante's actions alone but scrutinizes his thoughts will not overlook the "appa" rhyme that ends the canto without detecting a further reference to the pope, "papa," Dante's constant preoccupation. But it is possible to be still more precise and see in the traveler's face to face meeting with the Geryon a veiled allusion to Dante's encounter with Boniface VIII in October or November 1301. Dante, whose term as prior was ending, had gone to Rome with two Florentine dignitaries to obtain from the pope a cessation of hostilties between the Whites and the Blacks. The embassy failed miserably. Boniface soon dismissed the emissaries, but did not allow Dante, whom he had reason to fear more, to depart with his companions. With the support of the pope, Charles of Valois, brother of Philip the Fair, in the meantime marched into Florence and executed his plan to expel the Blacks and install the Whites in power. When he was summoned to answer the charges made against him, Dante did not dare to return home. He was then condemned to death *in absentia* and divested of his property. [107]

With these facts in mind let us read again the beginning of the scene. At the moment when they prepare to descend to the eighth circle, Virgil borrows the cincture Dante wore and casts it into the precipice. At this signal Geryon quits his haunt and shows himself to the pilgrims. The text is laconic in the extreme, saying only that Dante was wearing a "cord" with which he had in the past attempted to tame the leopard with the spotted hide and, after coiling and knotting it, handed it to his guide:

*lo avea una corda intorno cinta,*

*e con essa pensai alcuna volta*
*prender la lonza a la pelle dipinta.*

*Poscia ch'io l'ebbi tutta da me sciolta,*

*si come 'l duca m'avea comandato,*

*porsila a lui aggroppata e ravvolta.*

[Around my waist I had a cord as girdle,
and with it once I thought I should be able
to catch the leopard with the painted hide.
And after I had loosed it completely,
just as my guide commanded me to do,
I handed it to him, knotted and coiled.][108]

One can suppose that this cord, which has nowhere yet been mentioned, refers to some attempt on which Dante had once founded his vains hopes which he subsequently had to abandon.[109] If the monster it conjures is in fact Pope Boniface, the symbolism of the cord becomes obvious. The expression "UNA CORDA... e CON essa" contains a kind of wordplay that immediately brings to mind the accord or concord that Dante had sought in vain.[110] The whole scene thus acquires a remarkable coherence. The leopard, as we saw earlier, represented Florence and its political parties, which Dante had at first tried to reconcile. Unable to resolve the matter at home, he went on a mission to Rome, the source of the divisions that ravaged his native city, to negotiate with the pope an accord which unfortunately he failed to obtain. Assuming that this is the hidden meaning of this episode, Dante had good reason to say that his cord was "coiled" and "knotted." But we should not look for this knot in the cord itself. If it exists anywhere, it is rather in the enigma it invites us to resolve.

Boniface VIII was not the only one to stir the poet's wrath. Dante was no less harsh on his successor, Clement V, the "lawless shepherd . . . uglier in deeds," who transferred the papacy to Avignon and whom the *Comedy* also destines to the pains of hell.[111] Of all the medieval popes, only one was judged worthy of the *Comedy*'s paradise, the philosopher Peter of Spain, who was known under the name of John XXI.[112]

If the papacy remains ever so powerful and its activity is always so perni-cous, will there ever be a way to bring it back to order? As the following will show, the solution to which the *Comedy* inclines bears a strange resemblance to the solution that the author of the *Monarchy* advocated. To understand it, we have only to examine the role played by the angels, first in canto 3 of *Inferno* and later in cantos 28 and 29 of *Paradiso*.

### The Angels of *Inferno*

The first of these two texts deals with the crowd of the lukewarm shades or more precisely the "neutrals" that Dante and Virgil skirt at the moment they are getting ready to enter hell.[113] The individuals belonging to this troop are condemned to remain eternally nameless. Grouped around a banner that belongs to no one and only goes around in a circle, they are prey to a feverish agitation devoid of any purpose.[114] The only thing one can hold against them is that they distinguished themselves neither in doing good nor in doing evil, for which reason they languish before the gate of hell deprived of the praises or the reproaches they failed to earn in their lifetime.[115] If their fate appears lenient in comparison to the pains which the damned in hell suffer, it is no less pitiable than anyone else's. Since they never lived, so to speak, they are incapable of dying and find themselves forever destined to total anonynim-ity. [116] For companions Dante has joined to them the angels who remained undecided at the time of the revolt against God. Since these angels were neither "faithful" nor "rebellious," no one wants them, for which reason they are now disdained by both heaven's pity and hell's justice, envious of everyone but equally ignored by all.[117] Virgil, too, has no intention to concern himself with them. Thus he counsels Dante to pass right by without deigning to speak a word to them.[118]

It is hardly necessary to point out that the situation described in this canto cannot properly be understood from the perspective of medieval theology, which foresees in all and for everybody only four places to which souls are destined at the time of death: heaven, purgatory, hell, or limbo. Dante himself will henceforth speak of only two categories of angels, the good and the bad,[119] without ever mentioning again the third category he was pleased to note in the first place. What we have before us is evidently something of the poet's coinage, inoffensive in appearance and full of savor, but devoid of any theological foundation.

But then why did Dante, who was so concerned to be precise and who, it seems, could have done very well without this detail, highlight it by giving it a special place at the beginning of his poem? This has not been an easy question to answer. The annotated editions refer, not without some justification, to chapter 3 of the Apocalypse, in which there is mention of the angel of the church of Laodicea, who is neither hot nor

cold and who will be spewed from the mouth of God if he persists in being lukewarm.[120] The connection between the passages is nonetheless quite tenuous. In the first place, lukewarmness does not necessarily mean neutrality, and in any case the Apocalypse speaks of only one angel, no doubt with reference to the bishop of the city. It does not say at all that when God rejects him, hell will also reject him. Finally, the harsh admonition addressed to him is aimed only at inciting him to regain his fervor, which shows that his fate is not yet fixed.[121] Other possible comparisons have been suggested, such as with Clement of Alexandria's *Stromata*, the *Life of Saint Brendan*, and the legend of Parsifal, but never with much success, since the disparity between the contexts does not permit any conclusion to be drawn on their score.[122]

A more original explanation has been proposed by John Freccero, who finds a possible model for the poet in a theory of thirteenth century theology. [123] Freccero first notes with reason that the expression the *Comedy* uses to charaterize the behavior of the neutral angels is equivocal and has not always been well understood. Dante in fact says of this "bad choir" of angels that they were neither faithful to God nor rebellious against God, but "*per se fuoro*." Most modern translations take the preposition "*per*" to mean "for" and interpret the passage to mean that these angels were neither for God nor against him but "for themselves." But such is not the thought of the author. It seems, from what we know of the *Comedy*, that the expression "*per se*" means instead "apart." Since they did not remain faithful to God but also did not want to join with those who rebelled against Him, these angels became a group apart. It is this isolation or separation that defines their present situation. The *"per se"* of the neutral angels would correspond to *"da se"* in modern Italian. The same expression appears also in canto 17 of *Paradiso*, in which Cacciaguida predicts that in his exile Dante will come to detach himself from all political parties and will form his own party by himself: *"a te fia bello averti fatta PER TE stesso."*[124]

How is this possible? According to Freccero, medieval theology distinguished two moments in the angels' revolt against God. In the first the angel would have turned against God as his final end. No more was needed to sunder the bond of charity that united him to his creator and thus for him to be excluded from the beatific vision. Since this privation presupposes the absence of a good that is proper to him, it would be in itself an evil, but it would not entail any guilt. For there to be a fault, a second act must occur, in which the angel attaches himself to an inferior good, that is, to himself or some other created being. Only this second act would be morally culpable, the more so the further away the chosen object is from God.[125]

This information makes it possible to make some sense of the doctrinal anomaly the neutral angels seem to present. In effect, a neutral angel would not have committed any positive act in rejecting the happiness promised him. When a choice had to be made, he would have renounced the beatific vision, but without allowing himself to be attracted by another good, as though he were allowed to forge for himself a destiny other than the one God had foreseen for His creatures. His existence could be characerized by a "double negation,"[126] and this double negation would have made him stand out by losing him the place that was proper to him in the order of creation.

As for whether he is better or worse than the other angels, the question does not come up, since it cannot even be said that he has sinned. In avoiding any positive act, he deprived himself of the one element that could ensure his position in the cosmos as God willed it. Henceforth he finds himself completely separated from both God and all other created beings. Nothing any longer distinguishes him from the nothingness out of which he was drawn. Dante would thus have good reason to relegate him to this vestibule that is not strictly speaking part of the *Comedy's* spiritual universe. The total indifference of these neutrals who are neither hot nor cold would complete the range of possibilities Dante sought to place before our eyes by spreading the created beings along a ladder stretching from the glacial cold of hell to the intense ardor of the heavenly spheres.[127]

Freccero's thesis has the advantage of linking the problem to the discussions taking place in intellectual circles concerning the sin of the angels, but it also poses serious difficulties from the point of view of both theology and the *Comedy*. It is not at all evident what would constitute an act of the will, whether of an angel or any other being, that would have no object and that would come down to an "irreducible negation."[128] The scholastics did indeed distinguish between a negative aspect of an evil act, by which a creature turns away from its supreme good, and its positive aspect, by which it turns toward an inferior good that deflects it from its ultimate end. This is not, however, a matter of two consecutive acts, but of two distinct formalities of one and the same act.[129] The will has the good for its object and it is only attracted by the good. Even when it seeks evil, it does so only because it appears as a particular good to which it turns without considering its overall good.[130] It is therefore inconceivable that an angel can posit an act that would not have any positive object to specify it and that would be defined by sheer nothingness. The angel was not free to evade the choice that lay before him. If he renounced God, it was because he first

chose himself. That was already enough to ban him from the society of heaven and to merit him the pains of hell. Dante would have had good reason to complete the spectrum of the *Comedy* by adding the neutrals if they constituted a real class, but since no trace of them is to be found in medieval theology, the argument seems to lose all of its force.[131]

There is another kind of neutrality, however, which one cannot help think of and which makes sense of what we have just heard of the neutrals' double refusal or double negation in a way that is at once more simple and more in keeping with the historical facts of the poem. The great question of the day was without doubt the bloody quarrel that had been raging between the Whites and the Blacks in Florence. At the time where we are, the situation had worsened to the point where nearly everyone felt obliged to side with one or the other of the two factions. We can nonetheless surmise that, as always in such a circumstance, some minds would have felt ill at ease. The choice was not an easy one to make, the more so since the Whites seemed weak and ill equipped for the fight. Despite his opposition to the Blacks, Dante himself did not side with the Whites except because he dreaded even more the victory of their adversaries. For motives that could be more or less laudable, others simply preferred to stay out of the debate.

The problem went well beyond the narrow confines of a local conflict that recent events had just then incited. Since at least the time of Frederick II, all Italy was in prey to endless conflicts which shaky relations between the empire and the papacy only aggravated.[132] Resentment toward the Germanic emperor was constantly growing and inciting new revolts, but it was often accompanied by no less acute disdain for the temporal aims of the Holy See. Caught between these two great powers, the Italian communes tried to extricate themselves as best they could. It is thus not out of place that some among them would have attempted to remove themselves from imperial control without transferring their allegiance to the Church.[133] The *Comedy* seems to allude to them under the figure of the neutrals, whom it reproaches for following a policy of nonalignment, halfway, one might say, between revolt and fidelity. The God they forsook is not the biblical God, toward Whom one cannot be neutral, but the one who embodies God's supreme power in the natural order, that is, the emperor. Likewise, the angels joined with the humans in this place are not literally angels; instead, in accord with established and widespread usage we shall presently examine, they are the leaders of those communities neither glorious nor infamous, who, by cowardice or indecision, kept to the sidelines of events and did not leave behind any mark. One can thus understand why they have no right to any place in the poet's *Inferno, Purgatorio*, or *Paradiso*, in which, as he says later, we see only those souls who distinguished themselves in good or in evil.[134]

The word "angel" appears in only one other passage of *Inferno,* concerning the "black angels" who populate the fifth bolge of the eighth circle and who have been thought to signify, under deformed names, some of the notable Guelphs who opposed the poet's return to Florence.[135] In a similar way, canto 8 uses the circumlocution "more than a thousand who once had rained from Heaven"[136] to designate the masters or guardians whose watchful eyes Dante and Virgil needed to elude before they could penetrate to the interior of the City of Dis. It should be noted that all of these creatures are called angels by virtue of their political function rather than their specifically angelic nature.

### The Two Powers

The theme of the angels returns for its own sake and in detailed fashion in cantos 28 and 29 of *Paradiso*, devoted to describing the Primum Mobile, where, according to the poem's arrangement, the angels have their proper dwelling. No part of the *Comedy* risks appearing more naively medieval than this ample dissertation on the nature of separated substances, their number, attributes, hierarchy, and operations, as well as various points of doctrine about which the theology of the time used to argue.

Along with many other things, we discover that, of all the beings who circulate in the heavenly spheres, none is closer to the "the Point on which depend the heavens and the whole of nature"[137] and none has received a greater share of love or wisdom.[138] Their activity, which is symbolized by the speed of the movement that carries them, is more intense than any other creature's. Contrary to what the evil angels whom pride pushed to revolt, these angels were modest, "aware that they were ready for intelligence so vast, because of that Good which had made them."[139] This goodness is poured forth in them in diverse ways according to the their degree of natural perfection, without the least resistance interfering. Since their sole desire is to resemble as much as possible the Point around which everything turns, no new object intercepts their gaze, so much that their will is henceforth reaffirmed and fully satisfied. Since they never turned from the sovereign good, they have no need to recall anything to mind. The scholastic theologians, or at least some of them, are mistaken to think they are endowed with memory. [140] Set over the rest of creation, they are forever looking above and attracting to God all that is placed beneath them.[141] As to their number, the text points out, not without some equivocation, that it is hidden beneath the "thousands"

cited in the Book of Daniel, "who gives no number with precision," [142] which could mean that it could be either an indeterminable number or a yet unknown determined number. Finally, the *Comedy*, correcting St. Jerome on this point, assures us that no time elapsed between their creation and that of the other creatures. Had God done things otherwise, they would have been deprived for a certain time of their due perfection, which consists in making the lower spheres move.

"To the modern reader," as Grandgent thought, "such speculations seem otiose; and we are perhaps justified in believing that they did not appear very important to Dante"[143]—unless, under pretext of revealing to us the splendors of the angelic world, he had in mind to describe the princes and magistrates who remained faithful to the imperial authority, to which he wanted to restore the temporal power which had been so unjustly taken from it, as the end of the preceding canto pointedly recalls.[144] They are the ones, in fact, who maintain the closest relations with the emperor, execute his orders, extend the benefits of his rule to all parts of the universe, and watch over the welfare of the subjects to whom their own lives are inseparably linked. Their number is very great, given that we meet them at all levels of society, the diverse political entities of which are joined through the intermediary of ever larger units, to the first principle of the entire temporal order. They are ever faithful to the supreme authority, live lives that are beyond reproach, and have no need to reestablish ties that have never been sundered. They have their sight constantly set on the supreme authority and never turned to any other object. Above all they do not fall prey to preachers who falsify or abandon the gospel, the same ones that Beatrice denounces in a lengthy digression that is closer to the subject at hand than it may seem.[145]

The analogy, as we noted, was not new with Dante. It had occupied a considerable place in the literature of the Hellenistic period and could find a warrant in the Bible, which speaks of King David as "like the angel of God to discern good and evil."[146] In the same vein, medieval authors continued to ascribe quasi-divine attributes to the prince and to acclaim him as an image of the "blessed spirits."[147] In his physical being, he is subject as all men are to the laws of mortality, but in his corporate being he surpasses the human order and assumes in some fashion an "angelic character."[148] In the *Convivio* , when Dante himself deals with the hierarchy of beings, he does so less to affirm the specific distinction among brutes, men, and angels, and more to point out that it is not given to all men to participate in the same measure in divine goodness and that, in each case, their behavior makes them resemble either the beasts or the angels.[149] If then the neutral angels and the black angels of *Inferno* stand for the leaders of communities that are independent of or rebellious against Christendom, it is probable that the angels of *Paradiso* for their part represent the princes whose loyalty is vowed to the emperor in the new order which the *Comedy* sketches.

But why would Dante have chosen to speak of them in this precise place? The context will put us on the right track. In the section immediately preceding the two cantos devoted to the angels, Dante and Beatrice cross the heaven of the fixed stars, where they assist at the triumph of Christ and Mary and where Dante undergoes an examination on the theological virtues in the presence of the apostles Peter, James, and John. This long section, which goes from cantos 22 to 27, deals explicitly with the Church, of which the fixed stars were a common symbol in the Middle Ages.[150] In canto 30, which follows the treatise on the angels, Beatrice and her disciple reach the Empyrean or heaven of pure light. Their dazzled eyes rest on the vast city in the form of an amphitheater that opens before them and where "God governs with no mediator."[151] Its stalls are already so filled that only a few people have yet to arrive.[152] In the midst of them, they gaze upon a throne surmounted by a crown, the place intended for "the soul of noble Henry, he who is, on earth, to be imperial; he shall show Italy the righteous way—but when she is unready."[153]

The abrupt appearance of this emblem of worldly sovereignty in the highest heaven has sometimes seemed offensive to scholars. It could be said, as some have said, that since for Dante imperial power is of divine origin, it was normal for it to be represented even there.[154] But one would expect it to be accompanied by a corresponding image of ecclesiastical authority, which is no less ordained by God. The image is in fact there, although in a rather off-hand way, since at this moment Beatrice makes her last speech, in which she not only exalts the virtues of the emperor but also chastizes the duplicity of his rival, Pope Clement V, who betrayed him through deceit.[155] The scene may seem out of place, but only if one thinks that the *Comedy* constitutes a reversal of the *Monarchy*. But it is in the right place once it is seen in the context of the author's vision of a regenerated Roman empire, over whose worldly destiny presides an emperor installed in his capital and finally freed of all that could impede the exercise of his legitimate authority.[156]

This is not, moreover, the first time the idea is enunciated in the *Comedy*. It was already foreshadowed in the cryptic words Virgil spoke to Dante in the first canto of *Inferno*:

that emperor who reigns above,

since I have been rebellious to His law,
will not allow me entry to His city.

He governs everywhere, but rules from there;

there is His city, His high capital;
o happy those whom he chooses to be there![157]

Without a doubt the emperor who "rules" without any intermediary in his own city and who "commands" the rest of the world is the same as the one who appears again in canto 30 of *Paradiso*, as is also shown in the allusion in both passages to the imperial throne, which is not found anywhere else in the *Comedy*.

By placing the angels of *Paradiso* above the Church and below the Emperor, Dante seems to insituate once more that, with regard to the temporal domain at least, they come under the emperor only and answer to him alone. From this point of view, the *Comedy* changes nothing of the perspective adopted in the *Monarchy*. In spite of its surface conservatism, it brings us back once again to the idea of a monarchy that is more or less decentralized and emancipated from all ecclesiastical control. No one could deny that there is a sharp difference in tone between the *Monarchy* and the *Comedy*, but in light of what has just been said, the two works complement one another much more than contradict each other. The *Monarchy* boldly proclaims the emperor's autonomy in the temporal order while speaking of the pope only with extreme deference. The *Comedy*, on the other hand, seems to reaffirm the supremacy of the ecclesiastical power, but it is very harsh on the medieval papacy and does not spare it any criticism. Everything happens as though by proceeding this way Dante wanted to keep for himself some elbow room to chastise the abuses of the Holy See.

To complete the picture we should add that even in the *Monarchy* the idea of a universal empire modeled on the papacy is more abstract that it appears on a first reading.[158] One does not need to reflect much to recognize that Dante's monarch goes much beyond anything that has ever been seen or that one could expect to see in reality. Filled with wisdom and virtue, he combines in his person all of the qualities of Plato's philosopher-king, whom he sometimes brings to mind.[159] This was also noted by Guido Vernani, who rightly objected that such perfection is not to be found anywhere.[160] What Vemani did not say is that Dante himself no doubt did not think otherwise. His imaginary sovereign remains, on the whole, a distant figure who cannot be identified concretely and whose purpose rather is to serve as an ideal standard for all judgments to be made in the natural order. Only by means of such a fiction was it possible for Dante to give credence to the notion of a supreme political authority that could be a counterweight to the universal authority of the pope and in this way bring about, in the current situation in the West, what no local prince had the power to accomplish by himself.[161]

## Notes

1 See Dante, *Letter* VI, 2, 6–8, cited in chapter IV n. 11.

2 By a decree of May 19, 1315, Dante and other exiles were allowed to return to Florence on condition they acknowledge their guilt and pay a fine. See *Letter* XII, 12, 2–3.

3 Dante, *Letter* XII, 4, 9, in *A Translation of Dante's Letters,* tran. Charles S. Latham (Cambridge, Mass.: Riverside Press, 1891), 185–186.

4 Dante, *Paradiso* 22, 133–138.

5 See Dante, *Paradiso* 10, 135; and 15, 146.

6 See Dante, *Paradiso* 1, 70.

7 See Dante, *Paradiso* 31, 37.

8 Dante, *Inferno* 26, 113.

9 Dante, *Inferno* 26, 116–117.

10 Dante, *Inferno* 26, 97–99.

11 Dante, *Inferno* 26, 118–120.

12 Dante, *Inferno* 26, 125; see *Paradiso* 27, 82–83.

13 Dante, *Paradiso* 2, 20.

14 Dante, *Inferno* 34, 69.

15 See *Monarchy* III, 3, 7, in which Dante mentions among his adversaries in the first place the sovereign pontiff, at the time Clement V. Then come those who opposed the Holy Empire out of greed and, lastly, the "decretalists."

16 See W. Ullmann, *Scholarship and Politics in the Middle Ages: Collected Studies* (London: Variorum, 1978), 86; and, on the doctrinal rather than legal character of Boniface's text, M. D. Chenu, "Dogme et théologie dans la Bulle Unam Sanctam," *Recherches de science religieuse* 40 (1952): 307–316.

17 See Luke 22.38. Boniface interprets Christ's reply to the apostles, "It is enough!" as meaning that two swords suffice and no other is needed.

18 Boniface VIII, *Unam Sanctam*, in *The Crisis of Church and State 1050–1300*, trans. Brian Tierney (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1956), 188–189.

19 Boniface's ideas are in large measure derived from the *De ecclesiastica potestate* of Giles of Rome. As W. Ullmann notes, this is one of the first times a pope drew on the work of a theologian rather than a jurist in a document of this kind. *See Scholarship and Politics in the Middle Ages* (London: Variorum, 1978), 79. On the political ideas of Giles of Rome, see Edward A. Goerner, *Peter and Caesar: The Catholic Church and Political Authority* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1965), 26–57.

20 Boniface VIII, *Unam Sanctam*, in Crisis, ed. Tierney, 189.

21 See Dante, *Monarchy* III, 1, in *On World-Government*, trans. Herbert W. Schneider (New York: Macmillan, 1957), 72. All subsequent citations from *Monarchy* are taken from this translation.

22 See Dante, *Monarchy* III, 15, 8.

23 Dante, *Monarchy* III, 12, 10–11.

24 Dante, *Monarchy* III, 15, 17–18.

25 "Io non so vedere contradizzioni tra il poema e la *Monarchia*" (Michele Barbi, "Nuovi problemi della critica dantesca," *Studi danteschi* 23 [1938]: 51).

26 "La conclusione della *Monarchia* non puo esser considerata, in uno spirito cristiano come Dante, opinione di un momento piuttosto che persuasione ferma e permanente" (M. Barbi, "Nuovi problemi," 71). Barbi argued against Nardi, who said of the conclusion to the *Monarchy*:

> Ma questa a tutta l'aria, se non proprio di una tardiva giunta di chi rilegge suo sritto di vecchia data, di una scusa di chi, ritomando sui suoi passi, si accorge di averla fatta grossa o, per lo mero, di aver passato il segno, e cerca quindi di remperare il tono troppo assoluto delle sue parole. Senonché la scusa e magra, e non basta ad attenuare la sostanza di quanto era stato affermato. (Bruno Nardi, *Saggi di filosofia dantesca* [Florence: La Nuova Italia, 1967], 256–257)

27

> Col rivendicare l'autonomia dell'Impero, e per esso della communnità inferiori che a quelllo met-ton capo, di fronte alla Chiesa ..., Dante rivendicava implicitamente l'autonomia della ragione e della filosofia di fronte alla fede e alla teologia, e

giumgeva, così, con un'affermazione arditissima, a quella specie di averroismo politico che doveva essere, invece, il punto di partenza, poco piú d'un decennio piú tardi, delle dottrine politiche di Marsilio de Padova. La *Monarchia,* come a ben detto il Gentile, 'e il primo atto della ribellione alia trascendenza scolastica.' (Nardi, *Saggi*, 255–256)

28 "Nel Poema, infatti, pur ribadendo, ad accentuando, anzi, la tesi politica della missione assegnata all' Impero. Dante, ristabilisce, fra la ragione e la fede, qual rapporto di subordinazione che è proprio del pensiero medievale e che era implicitamente negato nella *Monarchia*" (Nardi, *Saggi*, 256).

29 Etienne Gilson, *Dante the Philosopher*, trans. David Moore (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1949), 300.

30 Gilson, *Dante*, 299.

31

Universal order, as conceived by Dante, *presupposes* and *requires* perfect and spontaneous harmony between reason and faith, between philosophy and theology, as a guarantee of the harmony which he aims to see established between the Empire and the Church. If, then, as is inevitable, we seek to understand his position by placing it in its historical relationship to others, it seems very difficult to connect it with that of the Averroists, whose doctine was founded on the established fact that, on a certain number of important questions, the teachings of faith and reason are not the same. (Gilson, *Dante*, 305; see also 214–215)

32 See Gilson, *Dante*, 306.

33 Gilson, *Dante*, 307; see also 221–222.

34 See A. P. d'Entrèves, *Dante as a Political Thinker* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1952). The author's view of Dante's itinerary are indicated in the titles of the book's three chapters: "Civitas," "Imperium," and "Ecclesia."

35

Mais, de plus haut, ce qui est saissisant dans la conception de l'Empire telle qu'elle apparaît dans *La Divine Comédie,* c'est le reflux vers le Moyen Age qu'elle représente. Au cours du XIIIe siècle, les éléments novateurs ont marché dans le sense d'une autonomie de plus en plus marquée de la société civile, de la pensée simplement rationnelle—les deux éléments, comme Dante l'a lucidement perçu, sont liés-par rapport à l'ordre religieux. La *Monarchia* est vérita-blement dans la ligne et à l'avant-garde de ces tendances. A son propos, on a parlé, souvent, de laïcisme. . . . Mais, en revanche, dans *La Divine Comédie,* l'Empire est au rhythme non pas des temps modemes qui alors se construisent, mais du Moyen Age le plus authentique, antérieur au grand renouveau économique et social aussi bien qu'à la Scolastique. (Jacques Goudet, *Dante et la politique* [Paris: Aubier-Montaigne, 1969] 190–191)

36

En un mot, si la *Monarchia* et le *Convivio*, cella-là plus lucidement mais déjà plus fragilement et comme en parte-à-faux, celui-ci plus instinctivement, comportaient quelque chose de progressif et de progressiste, un dépassement des idéaux les plus anciens et une participation aux idées les plus nouvelles, c'est par contre dans le sense d'une récession vers une idéologie ancienne, paléomédiévale, préscolastique que

> s'incrit le pensée politique de *La Divine Comédie.* Que l'on s'en réjouisse où qu'on le deplore, il faut en prendre son parti: *La Divine Comédie* est une oeuvre réactionnaire ou traditionaliste. . . . Ce qui marque fonçièrement, désormais, *La Divine Comédie,* en particulier dans sa conception politique, c'est le Traditionalisme. . . . Le passéisme sentimental, souvent perceptible, ne trompe pas. Dante a choisi de penser sa cite à l'heure du XIIe siècle, [aboutissant dans la *Comédie*] à une vue politique non seulement en retrait par rapports à ses précédentes conclusions, mais archaïque. (Goudet, *Dante*, 191, 195, 221–222)

37 See Dante, *Purgatorio* 1, 4–6.

38 Dante, *Purgatorio* 1, 31–39.

39 Dante, *Purgatorio* 1, 23–24.

40 This is suggested, for example, by Henri Longnon, trans., *La Divine comédie* (Paris: Garnier, 1966), 576 n. 327; C. Singleton, *The Divine Comedy, Purgatorio 2: Commentary* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1973), 9; and Scartazzini, *La Divina Commedia,* Testo critico della Società Dantesca Italiana riveduto col commento Scratazziniano rifatto da Giuseppe Vandelli (Milan: U. Hoepli, 1965), 301.

41 See Dante, *Inferno* 4, 34–39; and *Purgatorio* 7, 34–36.

42 See Dante, *Inferno* 18, 142.

43 Dante, *Purgatorio* 10, 127–129.

44 Dante, *Purgatorio* 13, 70–71.

45 Dante, *Purgatorio* 16, 1–6; and 34–36.

46 Dante, *Purgatorio* 19, 118–126.

47 Dante, *Purgatorio* 18, 97–98.

48 Dante, *Purgatorio* 23, 22–23.

49 Dante, *Purgatorio* 25, 136–138.

50 Dante, *Purgatorio* 23, 71–72.

51 See Dante, *Purgatorio* 11, 73–78.

52 See Dante, *Purgatorio* 13, 73–74.

53 Dante, *Purgatorio* 11, 115–117.

54 Dante, *Purgatorio* 11, 98–99.

55 In the phrase just cited, Dante spells out his own name, as he often does, but this time in reverse: "*E forse e naTo chi l'uNo e l'altro cacerA del niDo.*" The presence of the cryptogram is signaled by the coincidence of the first and the last letter (or if necessary of the first letter of the last syllable) of the phrase. Of course, all the other letters of the name are found in sequence within the phrase. The anomaly in this instance is that the cryptogram must be read in reverse, as Dante himself indicates in the verses that follow: "Worldly renown is nothing other than a breath of wind that blows now here, now there, and changes name when it has changed its course" (Dante, *Purgatorio* 11, 100–102).

56 See Dante, *Purgatorio* 12, 22–63.

57 See Dante, *Purgatorio* 14, 86–87.

58 Dante, *Purgatorio* 14, 149.

59 See Dante, *Purgatorio* 17, 13–18.

60 See Dante, *Purgatorio* 18, 16–75. It should be noted that Virgil insists on man's natural or spontaneous reaction to the various goods available to him (see 22–27). Freedom means the power to not allow oneself to be seduced by the mere appearance of good (see 34–39, 70–72). It is a seed in the human being that can be attained fully through education. As a good pagan, Virgil avoids speaking of "free will" in the sense understood by the Christian tradition (see 18, 73). See also *Monarchy* I, 12, 2–4.

61 See Dante, *Purgatorio* 23, 55–66.

62 On the distinction between the philosophical and theological conceptions of sin, Thomas Aquinas observes that "theologians define sin as an act against God; moral philosophers define it as contrary to reason" (*Summa Theologiae* I-II, q.71, art. 6, ad 5).

63 See Dante, *Purgatorio* 9, 115–132. "There he [Dante] beholds, seated on the steps, an angelic guardian who represents Ecclesiastical Authority." Dante, *La Divina Commedia,* ed. and annot. C. H. Grandgent, rev. Charles S. Singleton (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1972), 388. "Cet ange est la figure allégorique du prêtre, portier de la pénitence" (H. Longnon, *La Divine Comédie,* 586 n. 417).

64 On this subject see the prudent remarks of Grandgent, *La Divina Commedia,* 591–593.

65 See Dante, *Purgatorio* 31, 22–36. According to Gilson, Dante reproached himself above all for his debauchery with Forese, but also perhaps for certain doctrinal errors, notably the "more or less acute spell of 'philosophism'" by which he was supposedly affected at the time of the *Convivio.* See Gilson, *Dante*, 62–70, esp. 68 n. 1.

66 See Dante, *Purgatorio* 28, 121–135; and 33, 127–145.

67 Boniface VIII, "*Unam Sanctam*," in Tierney, Crisis, 188.

68 See Ernst Kantorowicz, *The King's Two Bodies: A Study in Mediaeval Political Theology* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1957), 485.

69 See Dante, *Monarchy* III, 15, 7.

70 See Dante, *Purgatorio* 29, 121–132. See Kantorowicz, *The King's*, 469. According to Singleton, Dante robed the moral virtues in purple to signify they were infused virtues informed by charity rather than natural virtues, following the teaching of Thomas Aquinas in *Summa Theologiae* I-II, q. 65, art. 2, ad 2. See Singleton, *Purgatorio 2: Commentary*, 273.

71 Dante, *Paradiso* 7, 36.

72 Kantorowicz, *The King's*, 492, 494.

73 Dante, *Purgatorio* 27, 142. For a more Christian interpretation of this idea, see Kantorowicz, *The King's*, 491ff.

74 See Dante, *Monarchy* III, 4, 12; and 16, 9–10.

75 See Dante, *Purgatorio* 1, 71–72.

76 See Dante, *Inferno* 1, 16–18.

77 Dante, *Inferno* 1, 33.

78 See Dante, *Inferno* 1, 44–51, in which the two beasts make their appearance together.

79 Dante, *Inferno* 1, 41.

80 Dante, *Inferno* 1, 52–54.

81 Dante, *Inferno* 1, 91–96.

82 See Dante, *Purgatorio* 16, 66–84.

83 See Dante, *Purgatorio* 16, 103–105.

84 See Dante, *Purgatorio* 16, 94–97; and also *Paradiso* 27, 129–131.

85 See Dante, *Purgatorio* 16, 117; and also *Paradiso* 3, 120; *Convivio* IV, 3, 6; and *Letter* VI, 1, 3.

86 See Dante, *Purgatorio* 7, 91–136.

87 Dante, *Purgatorio* 6, 76–78.

88 Dante, *Purgatorio* 16, 107. By speaking of "two suns," Dante is clearly reacting against the standard interpretation according to which the sun stands for ecclesiastical power and the moon for temporal power; see *Monarchy* III, 4.

89 Dante, *Purgatorio* 16, 127–129.

90 See Dante, *Purgatorio* 16, 100–102; and also *Paradiso* 18, 188–126; and Goudet, *Dante*, 185ff.

91 See Dante, *Purgatorio* 16, 109–116.

92 Dante, *Purgatorio* 16, 58–59.

93 See Dante, *Monarchy* I, 5–16. The idea of a universal monarchy is first enunciated, it seems, in *Convivio* IV, 4–5.

94 Dante, *Inferno* 27, 85.

95 See Dante, *Inferno* 27, 88–102; and *Paradiso* 27, 22.

96 See Dante, *Inferno* 19, 557; and *Paradiso* 30, 145–148.

97 See Dante, *Inferno* 17, 1–3.

98 Dante, *Inferno* 17, 7.

99 See Virgil, *Aeneid* VI, 289; and VIII, 202; Ovid, *Heroides* IX, 91–92; and Horace, *Carmina* II, 14, 7–8.

100 Dante's description also incorporates borrowings from Revelation 9.7–11.

101 Dante, *Inferno* 17, 10–15.

102 For the idea of the papacy afflicting the whole world, see also Dante, *Inferno* 19, 104; *Purgatorio* 8, 130–132; 16, 82–129; 20, 8–15. On Dante's use of the metaphor of stones to designate the papacy, see *Inferno* 16, 134; 17, 134; 18, 2; 19, 13; etc.

103 Dante, *Inferno* 16, 128.

104 See Dante, *Inferno* 16, 118–120.

105 Dante, *Inferno* 16, 124–126. Boniface is a lie which appears to be a truth; the *Comedy* , a truth which appears to be a lie. There was no better place to recall the discrepancy that sometimes exists between a gesture and the secret thought that lies behind it.

106 Dante, *Inferno* 16, 133–136.

107 See Boccaccio, *Life of Dante*, ch. 4.

108 Dante, *Inferno* 16, 106–111.

109 See Grandgent, *The Divine Comedy*, 142. “S‘il y un symbole, il demeure obscur. Tout ce que l’on sait, c‘est que le monstre qui va se montrer à l’appel de ce signal représente la fraude” (A. Pézard, *Oeuvres complètes de Dante* [Paris: Gallimard, 1965], 983).

110 “Dante in questo tempo non era in Firenze, ma era in Roma, mandato poco avanti imbasciadore al Papa, per efferire la concordia e la pace de’ cittadini” (L. Bruni, *Della vita, studi e costumi di Dante*, ch. 7, *Le vite di Dante,* ed. G. C. Passerini [Florence: Sansoni, 1917], 215).

111 See Dante, *Inferno* 19, 83–87; and *Paradiso* 30, 142–148. For John XXII, see *Paradiso* 18, 130–132.

112 See Dante, *Paradiso* 12, 134.

113 See Dante, *Inferno* 3, 22–69.

114 See Dante, *Inferno* 3, 28; and 52–57.

115 See Dante, *Inferno* 3, 24–26.

116 See Dante, *Inferno* 3, 46–48, 64.

117 See Dante, *Inferno* 3, 37–42; and 49–50.

118 See Dante, *Inferno* 3, 51.

119 See Dante, *Paradiso* 29, 50–54.

120 “I know your works; you are neither cold nor hot. Would that you were cold or hot! So, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spew you out of my mouth” (Revelation 3.15–16).

121 “Those whom I love, I reprove and chasten; so be zealous and repent” (Revelation 3.19).

122 See M. Mellone, “Gli angeli neutrali,” in *Enciclopedia dantesca,* ed. Umberto Bosco, I (Rome: Istituto della Enciclopedia italiana, 1970), 270–271.

123 See John Freccero, “The Neutral Angels,” *Romanic Review* 51 (1960): 3–14.

124 See Frecerro, “Dante and the Neutral Angels,” 4–5; and also J. Freccero, “Dante’s *‘per se’* Angel: The Middle Ground in Nature and in Grace,” *Studi danteschi* 39 (1962): 36–38.

125 See Freccero, “Neutral Angels,” 12–13.

126 Freccero, “Neutral Angels,” 13.

127 “The latter [i.e., the neutral angels] were at the zero point in a scale of action extending from the highest angel to Satan himself” (Freccero, “Neutral Angels,” 11).

128 Freccero, “Neutral Angels,” 14.

129 See Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* I, q. 19, art. 1; and I-II, q. 8, art. 1.

130 See Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* I, q. 19, art. 1; and *Summa Contra Gentiles* III, 6, 10.

131 The source of the misunderstanding at the root of Freccero’s thinking is to be found elsewhere, in the more specific problem that arises from the sin of the angel or of the first man. How could either stray from the prescribed path if both were created in a state of perfection? It is not difficult to conceive that. Once fallen, nature is inclined to sin, but that is not the case in the beginning. A good tree does not produce bad fruit, yet this is what happened. We stand here before the impenetrable mystery of moral evil. It is not enough to say that, since angel and man were endowed with free will, it depended on them to make the proper use of their will, since this is precisely what needs to be explained. As long as they kept God in mind, it was impossible for them to sin. Thus there had to be a moment when the angel, who had not yet been raised to the beatific vision, could act without reference to God as his final end. But that is only a matter of simple inattention or acting “without due regard” for the divine will on his part. To speak of

rejecting divine grace or renouncing the beatific vision as Freccero does is to say too much, since no act has been posited. The momentary inadvertence that the first moral fault presupposes is obviously not culpable. If it were, it would in turn have to be explained by something else. This inadvertence does not entail any denial, though it makes denial possible by diverting the creature's sight from its highest good. See Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* I, q. 63, art. 1, ad 4; I, q. 49, art. 1, ad 3; I-II, q. 75, art. 1, ad 3. For the history of the interpretations of the episode of the neutral angels, see Franceso Mazzoni, *Saggio di un nuovo commento alla 'Divina Commedia'* (Florence: Sansoni, 1967), 355–390.

132 On the politics of the Lombard municipalities a short time later, at the time of Frederick II, see Ernst Kantorowicz, *Frederick the Second, 1194–1250*, trans. E. O. Lorimer (New York: Ungar, 1957), 146–154.

133 See Kantorowicz, *Frederick*, 141–142.

134 See Dante, *Paradiso* 17, 136–138.

135 Dante, *Inferno* 23, 131. See Grandgent, *La Divina Commedia,* 185. See, however, the reservations on the identification of these black angels expressed by Scartazzini-Vandelli, *La Divina Commedia,* 173.

136 Dante, *Inferno* 8, 83.

137 Dante, *Paradiso* 28, 41–43.

138 See Dante, *Paradiso* 28, 72.

139 Dante, *Paradiso* 29, 58–60.

140 See Dante, *Paradiso* 28, 100–102; and 29, 70–81.

141 See Dante, *Paradiso* 28, 127–129.

142 Dante, *Paradiso* 29, 130–135.

143 Grandgent, *La Divina Commedia*, 884.

144 "That you not be amazed at what I say, consider this: on earth no king holds sway; therefore, the family of humans strays" (Dante, *Paradiso* 27, 139–141). See also in verses 136–138 the allusion to the cupidity of the Church, to which Dante attributed the victory of the Blacks over the Whites: "Just so, white skin turns black when it is struck by direct light—the lovely daughter of the one who brings us dawn and leaves us evening."

145 See Dante, *Paradiso* 29, 82–126.

146 II Samuel 14.17.

147 See Guibert of Tournai, *Eruditio regum et principum* III, 2, ed. A. dePoorter (Louvain: Institut supérieur de philosophie, 1914), 84.

148 See Kantorowicz, *The King's*, 8, 45, 271–271.

149 See Dante, *Convivio* III, 7, 6. On the difficulties this passage presents and the attempts to resolve them, see Guiberteau, *Le Banquet* (Paris: les Belles Lettres, 1968), 12–16. The *Comedy* compares the man who does not use his reason to a beast; see, for example, *Inferno* 26, 119–120; and *Paradiso* 19, 85.

150 See Giovanni Busnelli, *Il concetto e l'ordine del Paradiso dantesco*, Parte I: II concetto (Citta di Castello: S. Lapi, 1911), 118–119.

151 Dante, *Paradiso* 30, 122.

152 See Dante, *Paradiso* 30, 131–132.

153 Dante, *Paradiso* 30, 133–138.

154 See Singleton, *The Divine Comedy, Paradiso 2: Commentary* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1975), 505.

155 See Dante, *Paradiso* 30, 139–148; see 17, 82. Henry was elected emperor at the urging of Clement V, who later abandoned him for political reasons.

156 The empyrean of the *Comedy* bears some resemblance to the Coliseum. In describing it Dante seems to be thinking of Rome, the ideal seat of empire, as suggested by *Paradiso* 31, 32–40. See Thomas Caldecot Chubb, *Dante and His World* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1967), 583–584. Dante elsewhere laments that the emperor was never able to rule in Rome, which the papacy occupied thanks to the Donation of Constantine, whose authenticity he does not deny but which he always deplored. See *Purgatorio* 6, 112–114; *Inferno* 19, 115–117; *Paradiso* 20, 55–60; and *Monarchy* II, 11, 8; III, 10–14; 12, 7.

157 Dante, *Inferno* 1, 124–129.

158 On Dante's universal monarchy as a secularized version of the Church, see E. Gilson, *Dante*, 165–167 and especially 79: "By a curious paradox, Dante was able to raise up a universal Monarch vis-à-vis to the universal Pope only by imagining this Monarch himself as a kind of Pope." See also D'Entrèves, *Dante as a Political Thinker*, 50; Kantorowicz, *The King's*, 463 and 484. Dante applies the traditional image of the seamless garment, taken from John 19.23, to the Empire rather than to the Church; see *Monarchy* I, 16, 3; and III, 10, 6.

159 See *Monarchy* III, 11 ,7, in which the perfect man becomes the measure of both the pope and the emperor inasmuch as they are men. See also *Monarchy* III, 15, 8–10, which presupposes that the imperial power and philosophy are identical or closely linked.

160 Contra Dante Vernani upholds the position of St. Augustine, that there never was a true empire or emperor among the pagans. See Guido Vernani, *De reprobatione Monarchiae*, ed. N. Matteini, *Il più antico oppositore politico di Dante: Guido Vernani da Rimini* (Padua: Il Pensiero medioevale, 1958), 98, 7; 99, 16; and 116, 1.

161 This also seems to have been the position of Frederick II. See Kantorowicz, *Frederick* , 519–526.

# CHAPTER SIX

## *Dante and Christianity*

The imperialist interpretation of the *Comedy* that we have proposed is subject to a major difficulty which we have hardly touched upon thus far and which it is now time to consider if we want to see just how far Dante wished to go in his thinking. We said that the autonomy of the temporal power in relation to the spiritual power implies as a corollary the autonomy of natural reason in relation to theology. As many scholars have pointed out, the two questions are inseparable, for if man has a supernatural destiny, his earthly happiness is to be subordinated to it, and the truths of the natural order that lead to this earthly happiness must give way to revelation. Such was the opinion of the theologians of the day, and it is hard to believe that the author of the *Comedy* would have found fault with it.

Nonetheless some Dante scholars, more sensitive to the ambiguous or polyvalent aspect of the poet's language, have acknowledged that his political opposition to the papacy could have been joined to a spiritual opposition to Christian dogma itself, numerous signs of which could be found in the *Convivio* in particular, a work stamped by rationalism. Catholic by birth, Dante would have spent some time in heresy, perhaps even unbelief, then came to his senses and returned with enthusiasm to the doctrine of the Roman Church. He would have recalled these strayings in the scene in *Purgatorio* in which Beatrice succeeds in wrenching his acknowledgment of wrongdoing. "The enigma of Dante," as Philippe Guiberteau puts it, "is that he is a convert."[1] This is a seductive hypothesis, the more so in that, if it turned out to be correct, it would resolve the mystery that has always hovered over his work. It nevertheless has the disadvantage of failing to take into account that the *Comedy* itself is filled with all kinds of enigmas that one would wish to clarify before making a definitive judgment on the poem's deepest meaning.

### The Enigma of Statius

Our consideration of the relations between Dante and Christianity can best begin with the dialogue that takes place among Dante, Virgil, and the poet Statius in cantos 21 and 22 of *Purgatorio,* which forms a decisive moment in the story that is told to us. This is a mysterious episode if there ever was one, especially since it introduces one of the most important characters in the *Comedy*. Statius figures in no less than thirteen cantos; in this he is surpassed only by Virgil and Beatrice. Like them he goes from one place to another, something no one else does in the poem. The reader has been prepared for what is to come by the allusion in the preceding canto to an earthquake that has just shaken the mountain.[2] This tremor, as we soon find out, was not due to natural causes, whose effects are no longer felt in the upper part of Purgatory; rather it signaled the deliverance of Statius, whose soul had sojourned in this place for several centuries in expiation of his sins.[3] What is the significance of Statius's presence in the poem and to what does he owe this honor for which history does not seem to have destined him? Let us first recall the salient details of the three poets' first meeting.

In the course of their journey toward the summit of Mount Purgatory Dante and Virgil come upon Statius on the fifth terrace. As soon as they come together, the three strike up a conversation. Statius, who as yet knows nothing of the travelers' identities, begins to speak of his literary career and especially his admiration for Virgil, to whom he is quick to confess his indebtedness as a poet.[4] There follows a recognition scene of the utmost finesse, at the end of which Statius, forgetting for the moment that he is but a shade, rushes forward to embrace his revered master.[5]

Virgil is astonished at first to see that, despite his "wisdom," Statius foolishly allowed himself to be conquered by avarice.[6] Statius explains that the vice he was in the process of expiating at the time of their arrival was not avarice but another, less reprehensible vice, the vice of prodigality, and that he was placed among the greedy because the vices opposed to the same virtue—in this instance moderation in the use of riches—are punished in the same place.[7] In fact, the fifth terrace is the only one to hold more than one category of sinners, even though it is not easy to distinguish among them.

We learn subsequently that thanks to the famous prophecy in Virgil's Fourth Eclogue regarding the inauguration of a new order marked by the return of the Golden Age,[8] Statius converted to Christianity, but that, fearing the persecutions of the emperor Domitian, he remained to the end of his life a secret Christian, "*chiuso cristian.*"[9] This explains the absence of any refrence to his new faith in his two epic poems, *The Achilleid*, which he had not begun at the time of his conversion, and *The Thebaid*, which was then only half finished.[10]

Since there is no trace in the literary tradition either of Statius's avarice or prodigality, or of his Christianity, we must assume that these two details were invented by Dante for a purpose that any more or less complete interpretation of the passage has to take into account. It is no less obvious that, in the absence of any evidence from outside sources, such an interpretation can find support only within the *Comedy* itself. Fortunately, the text contains a number of indications that lead one to think that Statius, as Dante imagined him, was indeed the victim of the vices for which he reproaches himself, but in a rather unexpected manner.

Let us first look at the four *terzinas* in which Statius attempts to dissipate the misunderstanding which his presence among the avaricious had occasioned. We discover in the form of an acrostic in their initial letters the word "VELO" or veil, one of the key words Dante employs to alert the reader to the presence of a hidden meaning in the text.[11] Thus it may be that this passage should be given a meaning that goes beyond its literal sense. At the same time we observe that the first of these four tercets speaks expressly of the knowledge that occasionally renders intelligible what had hitherto been the object of doubt or wonder: "Indeed, because true causes are concealed, we often face deceptive reasoning and things provoke perplexity in us."[12] The antithesis between truth and its misleading appearance is ably accented by the willful interlacing of three terms designating truth and falsehood—*veramente* , *falsa,* vere. In typically Dantesque fashion, a correspondence is established between the intention of the passage and its literary form.

There follow three equally mysterious lines in which Dante misinterprets a verse of the *Aeneid*: *"Quid non mortalia pectora cogis, auri sacra fames*!"[13] This indignant outcry is provoked by Aeneas's accidental discovery of the crime committed by the king of Thrace, Polymestor, a former ally of the Trojans who, after going over to the Greek side, had put Priam's son Polydorus to death and confiscated the treasure that his father had entrusted to him. Statius gives to Aeneas's words a meaning which is plausible only if one takes the sentence as is, but which is flatly excluded by the context and is even clearly contrary to what Virgil intended to say. Instead of deploring the detestable appetite for gain that stirs the depths of the human heart, he laments that it has so little power over him: "Why cannot you, o holy hunger for gold, restrain the appetite of mortals?"[14] The contradiction is made all the more striking in that Statius explicitly states that he had at last understood what Virgil intended to say.[15] Since Dante had already informed us that he was fully informed of all of the details of this sordid story,[16] there can be no question here of a lapse of memory. The error is in all likelihood deliberate. Like the acrostic in the preceding verses, it suggests, among other things, that the text of the *Comedy* could also lend iself to more than one interpretation. We are thus brought to ask whether, in telling us about Statius's presumed prodigality or avarice, Dante is not seeking to draw our attention to another form of prodigality or avarice into which it was plausible for the Latin poet to fall.

It is not very difficult to guess what this new wrong might be. To convey his thought, the poet disposes of a privileged instrument of communication—words. Now words, like gold, can be dispensed or withheld in an inordinate way. All that the *Comedy* has to say about Statius leads one to believe that, while there is no valid reason to suspect him of being prodigal in the common meaning of the term, he nonetheless succumbed to a less common but no less important kind of prodigality. As the Christian author of two epics renowned for their pagan character,[17] it could be said that he showed himself prodigal in words, but also that his prodigality was unique in that in Statius it was accompanied by its opposite, in this case, taciturnity. Having said things about which it would have been better to keep silent, he ended up being silent about things that ought to be said. In that way he became guilty of avarice no less than prodigality.

As paradoxical as this hypothesis may seem, it becomes plausible when we think of the possible connection between the avarice at first gratuitously imputed to Statius and his secret Christianity. The two fictions may support and explain one another. In refusing to profess his Christian faith, Statius practiced what in the Middle Ages was called "*oeconomia veritatis*" or economy of truth.[18] His avarice is in reality identical with the tepidity of which he accuses himself in the same passage and that cost him to be punished for four centuries among the slothful, before he could move on to the terrace of the avaricious and the prodigal.[19] A more fervent Christian would have been less fearful and have spoken more frankly, even

at the risk of his life. Thanks to his cowardice, Statius escaped persecution, but he gave up any possibility of helping his neighbor. His position is exactly the inverse of the one just attributed to Virgil. Living before Christ as he did, Virgil prophesied His coming without benefiting from it himself. The most he was able to do, as one "who goes by night and carries the lamp behind him,"[20] was to show the way to those who walked in his footsteps. Statius, who was born a century later, knew of Christianity, but, although he embraced it for his own sake, he did nothing so that through him others might know of it in turn. Anyone reading his words would know nothing of the matter.[21]

Even if we find this interpretation correct, it seems that we have not advanced any further. What does it matter after all that Statius has shown himself a coward by not saying a word of his conversion to the Christian faith? His role in the *Comedy* seems no less adventitious and without any connection to the poem's internal structure or doctrinal content. This is not the case, however. A moment's reflection on the symbolic value of the three poets will reveal why Dante accorded Statius such an eminent position at this precise point in his odyssey.

Statius's role is to escort the two other poets and to serve as interpreter for them through the higher regions of Purgatory. His role is in large measure similar to the one Virgil played during the whole first part of the journey. It would seem, however, that the ordering is rather lacking in harmony. Given Dante's penchant for symmetry, we would normally expect a third epic poet to take over once the threshold of Paradise is reached. Beatrice, of course, will be there to accompany the traveler along the rest of his route, but since she is not a poet and it is not certain she is a historical figure, it seems difficult to place her in the same category as the two other guides.

The key to the mystery is furnished in part by the position of the three poets in relation to one another as they journey together, something which Dante is always careful to note with the greatest precision. In the scenes immediately following the first encounter with Statius, Virgil and Statius take the lead and Dante, who must rely on them, walks behind them respectfully. [22] As they prepare to cross the wall of fire, their positions are inverted: Dante goes before Statius and is described comically as a lamb between two shepherds.[23] When they come to the extreme limit of Purgatory, a further change takes place as Dante suddenly takes the lead over his two companions.[24] A short while later, Virgil retires definitively and, at that very instant, the name of Dante is heard for the only time in the poem and, as we are told explicitly, "by necessity."[25] The break marked by this scene comes out even more forcefully in that the pilgrim, filled with sorrow, cannot refrain from speaking Virgil's name three times in sucession: "But Virgil had deprived us of himself, *Virgil*, the gentlest father, *Virgil*, he to whom I gave my self for my salvation."[26] Everything takes place as though Dante, already crowned "emperor and pope of himself," no longer has to place himself in the hands of some other poet and can henceforth advance on his own. The third part of the *Comedy* will not be without its own epic father, who is none other than the author himself now become his own guide so to speak.

Here, too, we ought to mistrust the apparent modesty with which he assures us that he mentions himself only by necessity, "*di necessita*." Dante appears to be excusing himself, on the pretext, as he says elsewhere, that it is not becoming for an author to speak of himself in this manner in his own work.[27] Yet at the very moment he seeks to be pardoned for this impertinence, he falls back and once again places himself in the forefront. The expression "*di necessità*" also contains, hidden under the form of a cryptogram, the name of the poet, which comes out once we read the letters (here in upper case) in the intended order, that is, from left to right and right to left: "D[i] NecessiTA."[28] It is hard to believe that Dante would have taken delight in what looks more and more like kabbalistic devices. His astuteness goes further, to the point of sketching the gesture the reader has to make in order to decipher the text. Upon hearing his name called, Dante himself in effect looks from left to right, "just like an admiral who goes to stern and prow to see the officers who guide the other ships."[29]

In light of these observations, and keeping in mind what was said earlier of Statius, we may now deal with the unresolved problem of the symbolic value assigned to each of the three poets. The easiest case is without doubt that of Virgil, the pagan who has given us a manifestly pagan epic. The case of Statius, the poet par excellence of *Purgatorio,* is more complex but less unfathomable than it appeared at first. Thanks to the literary fiction invented by Dante, he represents the Christian who also writes a no less pagan epic than Virgil's. For his part, Dante is immediately recognizable as the Christian who has taken upon himself to produce a Chrsitian epic. By this elementary process, the symmetry that seemed to be lacking is restored and the poem's three canticles, *Inferno, Purgatorio,* and *Paradiso,* fit together without any evident lacuna. But is this in fact the case?

The problem with this explanation is that it presents us once again with an incomplete enumeration. A

fourth possibility has been tacitly omitted and now confronts us with an insistence that is all the more forceful since we had not previously given it any thought, that is, the hypothetical case of a pagan who would have thought of writing a Christian epic. Since it seems that neither Virgil's nor Statius's situation can be altered, their disciple's situation becomes questionable. It is no longer clear with which of the two categories he aligned himself. Could he too perchance have found it necessary to employ a strategy similar to the purely fictitious one he ascribes to Statius? It would to say the least be interesting if the author of the most celebrated Christian epic we have had abstained from saying outright all that he thought to have understood of the serious subjects he discusses.

There is no need to add that the idea that the subterranean levels of the Comedy would allow certain doubts to surface concerning the author's religious convictions challenges the conventional interpretation of the poem and will appear inadmissible to a good number of modern scholars. Even if this idea deserved our full attention, it would still be necessary to explain why Dante put so much effort into concealing his thought. The reason is very simple, however, and we shall see that he did not fail to speak of it. In the meantime, one should not too quickly forget the rigorous sanctions by which past societies, less liberal than ours, prohibited the diffusion of any opinion that was seen as prejudicial to the common good. Statius's secret Cristianity, which is rooted in the notorious hostility of the pagan emperors toward the new faith, might have its counterpart in the reticence affected by his medieval successor, who lived at a time when heretics and apostates were threatened with penalties once reserved to avowed Christians.

We have seen that, provided he knew how to handle himself, an author could avoid all direct confrontation with duly constituted authority without for that matter renouncing his freedom of thought. By posing as a defender of the estabished order, he creates a presumption of innocence in his favor and transfers to the injured party the responsibility for proving that the charges brought against him are well-founded. Even if he remains suspect, it would be difficult to find him guilty, since it is just about impossible to condemn someone for views that as such he never expressed, especially if they are contradicted by many statements he has made publicly. According to this hypothesis, Dante would have simply conformed in speech to the beliefs of his time, while seeing to it that an attentive and well disposed reader could discern what he truly meant. He would be an excellent example of that political mode that had already played such an important role in other periods of history. This is precisely what would constitute the superiority of his "wisdom" in relation to Statius's. By holding to a just mean between verbal avarice and prodigality, the author of the *Comedy* displayed a "measure" that his predecessor had not attained.[30] If Statius could be accused of speaking too much or too little, the same would not be the case with Dante. The strategy had the double advantage of allowing him to save himself and to instruct all of his readers, whatever their ability to understand what he had to say or what they hoped to gain from him.

## The Art of Returning

Is it possible to affirm with certainty that Dante was fully conscious of the dangers that threatened him and that he expressed himself in this way only to escape the snares of his adversaries? In the event there remains any doubt on this score, we have only to consult the *Comedy* anew. Among the procedures the author employs in *Purgatorio,* one consists in placing in parallel the seven capital sins and the beatitudes of the Sermon on the Mount. As soon as one of the sins inscribed on the pilgrim's forehead is removed, the chanting of the corresponding beatitude is heard. Pride is replaced by the beatitude exalting the poor in spirit; wrath gives way to the beatitude exalting the peacemakers, and so on.[31] The matter becomes complicated when we come to the fourth beatitude, "Blessed are they who hunger and thirst for justice," which Dante divides by making two distinct groups of the hungry and the thirsty.[32] In the view of some scholars, the division was necessary in order to arrive at the desired number of beatitudes.[33] It is more apposite to note that along the way Dante has dropped two other beatitudes, the "meek" and the "persecuted," which he could not reasonably exalt in a discussion that dealt precisely with the means of avoiding persecution.

The lacuna created by this omission is nonetheless filled by a new beatitude, taken from Psalm 31[32].1 and pronounced just at the moment when the chariot of the Church makes its solemn appearance: "Blessed are they whose sins are covered—*Beati quorum tecta sunt peccata*."[34] This time, we note, the author has eliminated the first half of the verse, which speaks of the "remission" of sins: "*Beati quorum remissa est iniquitas*." Hearing it, one would easily believe that he was less concerned to be forgiven than not to be caught. One should add that if these sins are "covered," they are such that they could be "uncovered" by any reader who is wise, just, and well disposed toward him.[35]

The same concern reappears, in yet more vivid terms, in canto 17 of *Paradiso*, which contains a prediction announced long before concerning the life of the poet. The prophecy is put in the mouth of his

great-grandfather Cacciaguida and not, as it should be, in Beatrice's.[36] Dante, visibly moved by the portrait Cacciaguida has just painted of Florence's internal strife,[37] begins to ask questions concerning his own future, about which he has reason to be concerned. Given what has already happened, he can expect the worst. If he knows beforehand what woes lie in store for him, he may bear them more easily than if they were to hit him unexpectedly, as he puts it, "the arrow one foresees arrives more gently."[38]

From Cacciaguida he learns that he will be banished from his native city and feel in his heart the unspeakable pain of involuntary exile. His accusers will easily find him guilty of anything they will want to fabricate against him. The blame, as usual, will be attached in the popular mind to the injured party.[39] He will have to leave all that is most dear to his heart. He will discover how bitter is the bread one begs of others and how harsh the stairs the guest treads in a stranger's house. The "insane, competely ungrateful and impious" scoundrels who will keep him company will soon turn against him, such that he will have to sever his ties to all political parties and form his own party of one.[40]

It is true that in his misfortune he will be able to count on the hospitality of a benefactor (usually thought to be Bartolomeo della Scala) who, like him, has nothing but disdain for all that others hold in highest esteem.[41] It is also possible that a complete reversal of the situation could occur thanks to the deeds of a young man who is still only nine years old, but whose virtues will soon reveal themselves.[42] Whatever happens, he will have to keep himself from seeking revenge, for, in spite of all of the snares that are set for him, his life is promised to a future that far outstrips the punishments that will befall his enemies.[43]

If there were no more to this prophecy than what we have just heard, we have good reason to feel deceived, since all the events it mentions either had already occurred at the time Dante wrote or never took place. The true content of the speech lies elsewhere. It has to do with neither the known past nor the uncertain future, but uniquely that part of the future whose broad lines can be discerned by a prudent and alert mind. In hearing that his glory is ensured, Dante is perplexed. A few moments' reflection suffices, however, to convince him that he must "arm myself with foresight," so that, if he should lose Florence, he might not lose other cities as well "through what my poems say."[44] If he were to tell all that he learned in the course of his long journey, he would incur the wrath of many readers.[45] The alternative is to remain silent, but then he would have to give up all hope of living in the memory of those who would come after him. A "timid friend of truth" would easily save his life, only to lose it among "those who will call this present, ancient times."[46]

This judicious answer evokes a smile of approval from his illustrious ancestor. The canto had begun with a somber allusion to the misadventures of Phaeton, the son of the Sun, who met his ruin for not following his father's counsels.[47] Once he is persuaded that this will not be the case with Dante, Cacciaguida can encourage him to put aside all falsehood and to reveal what he knows.[48] His cry will be as the wind that sends its roughest blows against the highest peaks. As for those with dark conscience who find it harsh, "let them scratch wherever it may itch." His words, bitter as they are at the first taste, will provide "living nourishment" once they have been digested and, without harming his current situation, will win him acclaim in generations to come.[49]

Cacciaguida's prophecy, which occupies the literal center of *Paradiso,* is in fact a commentary on what Dante had earlier in the poem called the "art of returning." In canto 10 of *Inferno,* when Dante and Virgil were wandering among the tombs of the heretics, they first encountered Epicurus and his disciples, who denied the immortality of the soul.[50] It is curious that the only heresy to be named is Epicureanism, which is strictly speaking not a Christian heresy. Dante is burning with desire to see the Florentines lying in the open sepulchres but does not dare tell Virgil of his wish. Nonetheless he will have the pleasure of conversing with two among them, Farinata degli Uberti, the illustrious head of the Tuscan Ghibellines, and the father of Guido Cavalcanti.

The exchange with Farinata is particularly interesting in that it puts Dante in the presence of the great adversary of his family, which had belonged to the Guelph party. Farinata begins by recalling the two brilliant victories that he won over his enemies.[51] For his part, Dante is content to reply that if his people were expelled they nonetheless "returned" each time, whereas the Ghibellines could not do the same since they were not well acquainted with the "art:" *"ma i vostri non appreser ben quel arte."*[52] Farinata acknowledges that this is the case, but he is quick to add that in less than fifty moons Dante himself will learn "how heavy is that art."[53] The event he is predicting seems to be the defeat of La Lastra, which took place fifty months later, in July 1304, and put an end once and for all to the hope Dante entertained of someday returning to Florence. The death penalty pronounced against him was never revoked—it was even reiterated—and, from what we know, he never again set foot in his native city.[54] One might thus conclude that he, too, did not master this art of returning in which he glories, unless one should think he would have

had some other way to return to his native city. But what could be this new way of returning? The story of the poet Tedaldo degli Elisei, the seventh story told on the third day in Boccaccio's *Decameron,* will put us on the right track.

Tedaldo, we are told, fell in love with a woman named Ermelina, whom he visited as often as he could without arousing the suspicions of her husband, Aldobrando Palermini. All was going well until, without prior warning, he was rejected by Ermelina, who was determined never to see him again. In the throes of despair, Tedaldo changed his name and left Florence for Cyprus, where he soon became famous and prosperous. One day he heard a poem sung which he had composed in honor of his beloved. Overcome with desire to be with her once again, he returned to Florence disguised as a pilgrim of the Holy Sepulchre and met his four brothers, who were in mourning for his supposed death. Tedaldo was thought to be the victim of an assassination that had just been committed and of which Ermelina's jealous husband stood accused.

Without wanting to disabuse them, the next day Tedaldo went to visit Ermelina. He learned that she had lost none of her love for him and that it was only at the urging of her confessor, a rapacious and debauched monk, that she had renounced him. Thanks to Tedaldo's intercession, Aldobrando was freed and, to celebrate this happy outcome, Tedaldo hosted a sumptuous feast at his own expense to which the two families, his and Aldobrando's, were invited. Only now did he abandon his pilgrim's disguise and, donning a green tunic, he revealed himself to his brothers. In spite of this, doubts regarding his true identity persisted for a long time. Many Florentines took him for a ghost and even his brothers were not convinced that it was really he. These doubts were only overcome with the chance discovery that the murder victim was a certain thief named Faziuolo, who looked so much like him that they could not be told apart.

It was still widely known in the nineteenth century that this story, which Boccaccio seems to have invented whole cloth, was probably a secret biography of Dante.[55] Its hero immediately calls to mind the other poet who returns, in the garb of a pilgrim, to his native Florence after many years of exile. Like Dante, Tedaldo is filled with nostalgia when others intone his own love songs in his presence.[56] His diatribes against the churchmen responsible for his misfortune recall the invectives of the author of the *Comedy,* who is no more soft on those "ministers of divine justice" whom one would think are rather "instruments of the devil."[57] Let us note without insisting that the thief whose disappearance coincides with his return is called Faziuolo, the pejorative diminutive of Bonifazio or Boniface. In itself this means nothing, but if we remember Dante's troubles with Boniface VIII, the detail becomes that much more piquant.

Even the name of the hero, Tedaldo degli Elisei, suggests Dante's name. Dante belonged to the ancient family of the Elisei. Boccaccio, who recalls this fact, also points out that his patronym, Alighieri, was originally written Aldighieri.[58] Although there were several people by the name of Tedaldo in Florence, we know of none who was of the Elisei family.[59] If Boccaccio, who did not ordinarily choose his names haphazardly, retained it, this is almost certainly because he combined the second syllable of Dante with the first two syllables of Aldighieri. As for Ermelina's name, Boccaccio could have chosen it to evoke the idea of whiteness or ermine and to signify Florence that was once White and had since fallen into the hands of the Blacks, but to which the poet was always deeply attached. Nothing would then prevent us from seeing in the banquet Tedaldo hosts to celebrate the reconciliation of the two enemy families an image of the *Comedy* itself, which seeks in its own way to resolve the war that had broken out between the two opposing factions and had caused the author so much suffering.[60] Dante was well acquainted with the metaphor, to which he had already devoted his *Convivio.*[61]

This old interpretation may seem affected from our vantage point in time, but its merit is to suggest how, despite the circumstances, Dante could say that he possessed a particular art, the secret of which would have eluded Farinata and his party. Banished from his homeland, he really and truly returned, if not in flesh and blood, at least in and by his poem.[62] At the very moment he enters Florence in the company of Virgil, he strikes up a conversation with a banished Ghilbelline that is meant to put in broad daylight the *tour de force* that has just taken place before our eyes. This same poem allowed him to win a posthumous victory over his adversaries and at last obtain the honors which his fellow citizens were not disposed to grant him in his lifetime. By their intransigence, the Ghibellines only succeeded in sealing their own ruin. They were perceived as heretics and earned themselves death or exile. The fact of the matter is that from 1266 onward there were no more avowed Ghibellines in Florence.[63] In their reduced state, only a more supple attitude could have reopened the city's gates to them and ensured their survival. The heretics in canto 10 of *Inferno* are not true heretics; they are Epicureans who, by resigning themselves to their fate prematurely, in practice acted as though the soul died with the body.[64] Dante admires their noble pride that finds any compromise with baseness repugnant,[65] but he wants just as much to show us that even a situation as

desperate as this one could in the end be transformed into a dazzling triumph.

## Allegory and Concealment

An objection inevitably comes to mind as soon as we take seriously the possibility of such reserve on the part of the poet. It is indeed hard to see why Dante, who is considered one of the most courageous authors of his time, would have acted like Nicodemus in a manner worthy of the greatest coward. After all, he knew how to give free rein to his verve when his heart told him to, and he had no scruple in stating on occasion just what he thought of the political and religious institutions of the Middle Ages. Even the biting allusions we have seen to the malice and hypocrisy of Boniface VIII in canto 17 of *Inferno* only restate in another form the reproaches Dante addresses elsewhere to this pope whose conduct horrified him and for whom he did not fear to reserve a place in hell along with most of the other popes of the time. This boldness won him the implacable hatred of his enemies and from the beginning made him an author feared by church authorities. The Monarchy was burned in some cities of northern Italy upon its publication and was for a very long time on the Index of Forbidden Books.[66] Had it not been for the patriotic zeal of the Italian clergy, the *Comedy* would likely have been subject to a similar fate at the time of the Council of Trent.[67] It would be odd for Dante to be so concerned to conceal in one place what in another he revealed with astonishing frankness. His daring being well known to everyone, he had no reason to hide it.

Let us not waste time denying Dante's proverbial boldness. The question is not whether he was bold but how far he took his boldness. It is not impossible that it is part of a more subtle travesty which it seeks to conceal from our eyes. We all know that a disguise is not effective unless it is itself disguised. Dante, who knew that as well as we do, also knew from experience that in general people do not easily believe that an author known for his intrepidity should be even more intrepid than he appears to be. Thus he was free to use his boldness to camouflage his true boldness and see to it that it would usually go undetected. Dante's reason for acting like Nicodemus in the *Comedy* would thus be much more profound than we think. By focusing our minds on problems of a practical order, Dante would have given himself more liberty to raise indirectly certain problems that are otherwise dangerous, about which it was to his advantage to keep silent. His skill consists in "putting his readers on the trail of certain hidden senses that are easy to discern so as to more effectively distract their attention from another, truly hidden meaning, the one that is the most interesting but less easy to uncover."[68] This strategy, which Dante calls *dissimulatio* in the *Convivio,* resembles, he says, a general's creating a diversion at the rear of a fortress with the intention of attacking it by the front once its defenders have been turned away.[69] It was altogether appropriate for P. Renucci to say that "the *Comedy* is at once the most open and the most secret of books."[70] The allegory it employs is in reality a two-shot weapon, the first of which serves to make us forget the second.

## The "Faith" of the Pilgrim

On the other hand, we clearly will never be able to prove that a doubly secret intention lies hidden beneath the pages of the *Comedy* unless we can say what this intention is. Our analysis of canto 22 of *Purgatorio* seemed to suggest that in order to escape persecution Dante only did what Statius had done in maintaining a respectful silence regarding his religious beliefs. Now the idea that he would have rejected the Christian faith in his mind and heart is belied by the massive impression one gets from reading the entire poem. It may well be that, at the time he was writing the *Convivio,* Dante flirted with unbelief and underwent what could easily be taken as a "rationalist" crisis, echoes of which can be heard in the *Purgatorio.* These doubts, however, if indeed he had them, would have been soon overcome, else it is hard to imagine that he would have dedicated such sublime pages to the glory of the Christian faith as one finds throughout *Paradiso.* Dante, the poet of the beatific vision, could be nothing but a Christian. No reasoning, however ingenious, will ever succeed in shaking such a solidly rooted conviction in his readers.

The argument seems all the stronger in that it rests on the great many texts that could be adduced. Yet it nonetheless would be more convincing if Dante had not put us on guard against a too superficial interpretation, especially of the last part of his poem, which is by far the most difficult of the three.[71] To resolve this problem, one would need to do a detailed analysis not only of the *Paradiso* but of the *Comedy* in its entirety. Since this would require a great deal of time, let us take up the handy abridgement provided in the three cantos that directly address the question of Dante's Christianity, namely, cantos 24, 25, and 26 of *Paradiso,* in which, under Beatrice's watchful gaze, the pilgrim undergoes an examination regarding the theological virtues of faith, hope, and charity. We will once again find something to think about.

The interrogation is confided in turn to the apostles Peter, James, and John, the favored disciples of the Lord, whom he called to share his most intimate secrets and who have become the patron saints of the three great centers of medieval Christendom, Rome, Santiago de Compostela, and Jerusalem.[72] One would expect

the candidate for the supreme honors of Paradise to undertake sooner or later a spiritual journey that would take him to these places in thought. In spite of everything, the pilgrimage is rather suspect, and the questioning to which Dante accepts to subject himself is not of a sort to give us complete assurance regarding his interior dispositions.

As has often been observed, the examination on faith from the start resembles a scholastic disputation. The "bachelor" arms himself with all of the reasons (*ogni razione*) he can muster and waits to be questioned before speaking. His duty is not to "resolve" (*terminar*) the question, which it belongs to the master to do, but to debate (*approvar*) it as best he can.[73] Accordingly, his answers are proper beyond reproach. What is faith? It is, as St. Paul says, "the substance of things hoped for, the proof (*argomento*) for what we have no evidence." It belongs accordingly to the dual category of "substance" and "proofs." Since the things it deals with remain hidden to our eyes, their existence (*esser*) can only be the object of belief. There will nonetheless be "proof" in the measure one "reasons" (*sillogizzare*) on them in order to draw the desired conclusions.[74]

This raises a further question: Does Dante have this substance in his pocket, that is, does he himself have faith? Yes, he certainly does. The "syllogism" that attests to this truth consists of two premises, the Old and the New Testaments. In the face of such a clear "demonstration," any other truth seems obscure.[75] But what proves the divinity of Scripture? Miracles prove it.[76] At this point, a new difficulty arises: Since these mariacles are themes-lves attested to only by Scripture, is this not a circular argument? Not at all, for even if none of them had ever occurred, the conversion of the world to Christianity would consititute by itself an event a hundred times more remarkable than any other miracle.[77]

St. Peter is so visibly impressed by this brilliant performance that he has only to congratulate the student and grant him his blessing.[78] We, too, could rest satisfied if Dante had not insisted so much beforehand on the superiority of argument from reason over mere argument from authority. As Cacciaguida had already said, "the mind of one who hears will not put doubt to rest, nor put trust in you, if given examples with their roots unknown and hidden, or arguments too dim, too unapparent."[79] Let us note that the pilgrim has spoken, not of his own will, but because he was ordered to do so.[80] Not surprisingly, then, his answers are aimed above all at "pleasing" his interrogator. [81] The answers are undeniably rigorous, but as the text insinuates, with a measure of irony, they are akin to those of a sophist.[82] As for the victory of Christianity, one would have to see if it is not due as much to human causes as to a noteworthy miracle. Canto 32 of *Purgatorio* seems rather to attribute it to the support of the emperors from which the Church has benefited at various times.[83] In any event, the miracle would be yet more complete if "the good plant that was once a vine" had not changed itself into a "thorn."[84]

The candidate, as we learned at the start, was not asked to resolve the question; his task was only to examine the two sides of the question. Perhaps we would do well to imitate him. Indeed, there is hardly anything in this exchange of statements that could not refer just as well to the faith that Dante placed, not in Holy Scripture, but in his own writings, whose substance itself remains enveloped in a deep mystery.

By looking further into the text, we would discover no doubt many other elements that are no less indicative and hardly more reassuring. From the beginning we sense that Dante is appearing not so much before the heavenly court as the papal court, fully determined this time not to expose himself to a new disappointment. The "chosen fellowship, *sodalizio eletto*," that receives him resembles in fact an assembly of well-fed Roman cardinals, while poor Dante, reduced like the Lazarus of the parable to a beggar's state, must rest content with the crumbs that fall from their table.[85] In their midst sits the "blessed lamb, *benedetto agnello,*"[86] in whom the reader can here again detect Boniface VIII. His given name was Benedetto Gaetani, and he continued to call himself by that name even after his election as supreme pontiff.[87] His vestments are so sumptuous that neither the pen nor the imagination of the poet could ever arrive at rendering all of their nuances. [88] The title of "Chief Centurion, *alto primipilo*," is also apropos, especially when one thinks of Boniface VIII's military campaigns.[89] But are we certain that it is truly he who Dante has in mind? In case we had not noticed, Dante takes care to bring him to mind by once again playing on his name: "So may the Grace that grants to me to make confession . . . permit my thoughts to find their fit expression, *faccia li miei concetti bene espressi*."[90] In such a context, the pontifical blessing which customarily concludes an audience does not appear at all arbitrary.

After such an equivocal confession, the idea expressed at the start of the next canto, in which the subject is hope, becomes almost irreverent. Dante has good hope that his "sacred poem" will overcome the cruelty that banished him from his native city as the enemy of the "wolves" that make of him their prey. He will then be able to return "with other voice, with other fleece" to put on at his baptismal font the laurel crown that is destined to be his, since there he entered into the faith for which Peter has just garlanded his

brow.[91] This says a good deal about the object of his hope for future glory. This hope appears to hold little in common with heavenly glory. The poet, dressed in a "double fleece," expects rather to receive glory in his own land, which is none other than "this sweet life, *questa dolce vita.*"[92] To a Christian this double garment which theology spoke of is the glory of the soul and of the body in the life to come.[93] The refined ambiguity of the expression imitates very nicely the double appearance under which Dante has sought to present himself to us.

We shall say only a few words regarding the examination on charity, in which the pilgrim, dazzled as was Saul by the rays emanating from St. John, must use reason to compensate the temporary loss of his sight.[94] The object of his love is the supreme good and the entire universe in the measure that he participates in its goodness. This "good inasmuch as it is good" is known to him as much by philosophic proofs as by the authority that comes from heaven.[95] The ardor he invests in pursuing it has been revived in him, not only by this certain knowledge, but by all of the morsels that can turn the heart to God and have joined to draw him "from the sea of twisted love and set [him] on the shore of the right love: the world's existence and his own, the death that He sustained that [he] might live, and that which is the hope of all believers, as it is [his] hope."[96] What is Dante trying to make us think of? Only the existence (*essere*) of the world and his own existence, as it is most often claimed? This does not seem to be the case, for neither the one nor the other is properly speaking a morsel, not to mention that the idea would duplicate what was just said concerning rational proofs of the divinity. The simplest approach is to take the word essere in the ordinary sense of a "state," which makes the phrase perfectly intelligible. It is, as we have seen, the actual state of the world as well as the pitiful state in which Dante found himself, that awakened in him the dream of a happiness whose realization no longer depended on the political conditions of his time. The thought contained in the verse that follows would then be linked to the preceding verse, provided one sees that the death in question is not Christ's death but Dante's own political death, which gave rise to his new calling. Grammatically, the pronoun el can only refer to God, who is mentioned earlier, but, without any immediate antecedent, it could also designate the poet himself, or, more exactly, the first Dante, whose spiritual death we have already witnessed in the *Inferno.* This would not be the only instance of a doubling of this kind in the *Comedy.* The scene which follows affords us yet another instance. In any event, one would have expected statements that were a bit less amphibological.[97]

### The New Adam

The discussion of the three theological virtues is barely over when a new spark manifests itself, that of Adam, to whom Dante, his sight now recovered, wishes to ask a few questions. He wants to know how many years have passed since the creation of the world, how long Adam sojourned in the earthly paradise, what the cause was of his expulsion, and what language he created and spoke.[98]

Adam, who already knows these questions without Dante needing to formulate them, is quick to respond, but he does not always do so directly or in the order they were raised. He answers that he was banished from the earthly paradise, not for having tasted the fruit of the tree, but solely for having trespassed the boundary (*segno*) that had been fixed for him.[99] He stayed a total of 4,302 years in Limbo before being liberated by Christ.[100] He lived on earth no less than 930 years.[101] The language that he once spoke had completely disappeared at the time of the Tower of Babel.[102] Finally his stay in the Garden of Eden lasted from the first hour of the day until the one following the sixth, that is, hardly more than six hours.[103] With that Adam's discourse ends abruptly without any further clarification.

Let us take a closer look at these answers and see if they contain anything more than what they state explicitly. First, let us consider the chronological information. It is no surprise to learn that Adam lived to the age of 930 years, since that is just what the Bible teaches in Genesis 5.5. Regarding the number of years that passed between his death and the descent of Christ into hell, there was a great deal of uncertainty in the tradition. Clement of Alexandria dated the birth of Christ to the year 5590; Hippolytus put it at 5503[104] St. Augustine simply noted that, at the time he was writing, the world was less than 6,000 years old, without providing any more precision than the biblical data warranted. [105] To my knowledge, no one has yet observed that Dante's chronology follows very precisely that of Orosius, according to which the Messiah, born in 5199, would have died 33 years later, in the year 5232[106] By subtracting from that number the 930 years Adam lived on earth, we arrive at the number 4,302, the same number Dante adopts in the *Comedy.*

One would have to ask, however, whether Dante was content to slavishly reproduce the information provided by his predecessor or if he did not adapt it to serve his own purposes, as the text itself suggests. Adam in fact does say: "During four thousand three hundred and two returnings of the sun, while I was in that place from which your Lady sent you Virgil, I longed for this assembly." [107] The place from which

Virgil left to come to the aid of Dante can only be the Limbo in canto 4 of *Inferno,* where dwell the souls of virtuous pagans who died before the coming of Christ. Now, the first part of the poem from the start of canto 4 to the end of the canticle contains exactly 4,302 verses, excluding the last four verses, in which Virgil and Dante leave the infernal regions and see for the first time the stars that shine in the firmament of the southern hemisphere.

One might call this simply coincidental, but that is not possible, for the same procedure was already employed to explain the duration of Adam's stay in the earthly paradise, which Dante reduces, as others before him had, to approximately seven hours.[108] This piece of information has no support in Genesis either, which has nothing to say on the subject. On the other hand, it corresponds precisely to the duration of Dante's own stay in Eden, situated at the summit of Mount Purgatory. He entered it at dawn, that is, according to the *Comedy*'s timetable, at six in the morning, and he left when the sun had just changed quadrant, a little after noon.[109]

The most curious aspect of all of this is that Adam has never answered Dante's precise question concerning the actual age of the world. To arrive at that answer, one would have to add the 930 years of Adam's earthly life to the 4,302 years between his death and Christ's descent into hell, as well as the 1,267 years from the death of Christ to the year 1300, the year of the poem's action.[110] This yields a total of 6,499 years, or, considering that another year has already begun, 6,500 years. By itself, this detail is not particularly revealing. It becomes so, however, as soon as we note that, according to the *Comedy,* the world as we know it was to last another 6,500 years.[111] This would come down to saying that Dante's work symbolically occupies the center of human history. As the poem's opening verse announces by way of allusion, the work is situated, not without some degree of presumption, "in the middle of our life's way," and not only, as is said again and again, in the middle of his own life.[112] The new Adam whose coming it proclaims is not quite the one announced by the Christian tradition![113]

Once this is recognized, it is likely that the parallel between Adam and Dante extends to other themes in the speech, such as the nature of original sin and the loss of the primitive language. One finds, in fact, that Adam's idea of original sin bears little resemblance to the one upheld by the most esteemed theologians of the thirteenth century. According to St. Thomas, the precept forbidding Adam and Eve to touch the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil was in no way arbitrary. It was rooted in the intrinsic evil of this act, whereby man willed to attain knowledge to which by his nature he had no right or which could be obtained only by disordered means.[114] For his part, Adam shows no concern for the reasons that seemed to justify such a precept. To listen to him, one would think that "the cause of [his] long exile did not lie within the act of tasting of the tree, but solely in [his] trespass of the boundary."[115] In other words, the act of which he was judged guilty was not forbidden because it was bad; rather, it was bad "solely" because it was forbidden. God comes across as a capricious tyrant whose decrees are incomprehensible and devoid of any wisdom. We do not see how, as a good Aristotelian, Dante could have sided with such irrationalism. However, we should not be taken by what is only a pretext to speak about something else. All the evidence indicates that the text does not have to do with Adam's fault and his metaphoric exile, but with the very real exile to which Dante himself was condemned, not because he committed a crime—he never admitted to that—but solely for having crossed the tyrannical power that had taken hold of the city.[116]

By a surprise turn, what follows in the speech brings us back to that same idea. To satisfy his interlocutor's curiosity, Adam launches into a dissertation on the evolution of human language. The language he himself spoke, he says, became extinct when "the race of Nimrod" was bent on the project it could not complete, the construction of the Tower of Babel. It is the same with human languages as it is with the leaves upon a branch: "one comes, another goes." There is nothing strange in this, since, although language is natural to man, the idiom in which it is expressed is not fixed by nature. It is dependent on man's good pleasure, and, "following the heavens, men seek the new, they shift their predilections." Before Adam was "sent down to Hell's torments, on earth the Highest Good . . . was called I; and then He was called *El*." Nothing the human mind produces, however reasonable it may be, is immune to the vicissitudes of time.[117]

These details would appear quite superfluous if they contained nothing more than a philosophical theory, laced with a few historical considerations, regarding a question that bore no relation to the rest of the story. But is all this only about language? Dante, who is not in the habit of wandering from his subject, seems to have taken the term in a wider sense that is closer to the theme of this passage. To maintain that men no longer spoke the same language or that they called the highest good by another name is to affirm in so many words that from a certain time onward their common life underwent a radical transformation or that a new regime came to replace the one under which they had lived up to that time. In Florence itself, torn by

bloody struggles between two irreconcilable adversaries, a revolution had taken place, in the course of which the "race of Nimrod"—one can see right away just who that refers to[118]—had intervened to add to the confusion and to tip the scales in favor of the Blacks. The human will is so fickle that it always ends up, sooner or later, preferring to the good that it possesses certain novelties that it would not hesitate to reject if it were more sensible.[119] Such are the "hellish torments" down to which the Adam of the *Comedy* was sent for his misfortune. Precisely because he no longer shared the views of his fellow citizens, or no longer spoke the same language they spoke, Dante was banished from his native city forever. The questions he was so anxious to ask the first Adam are in fact related and can be fully understood only in terms of the identity they establish between the two characters.

One more question remains, which the *Comedy* raises only indirectly and which concerns the reason why the encounter with Adam follows immediately upon the the examination on the three theological virtues. It was no doubt fitting that the new Adam should only emerge after giving "proofs" of his Christianity. But how does this new Adam differ from the first? At the end of *Purgatorio,* Dante already appeared as an "*Adam subtilis*," the protopype of a humanity restored to its primitive nature and endowed with all of the attributes proper to his species.[120] Will it always be maintained that the Adam of *Paradiso* is simply joined to his predecessor as the supernatural order is added to the natural order, to complete it and elevate it to a higher degree of perfection? We would be more comfortable with such an interpretation if Dante had not alerted us through the intermediary of Statius that he was not bound to reveal himself fully to us and if his own confession of faith did not leave so much to be desired.

There exists another interpretation, formerly more widespread, according to which Dante would have abstained from passing judgment on the truth of Christianity so as to let the reader draw his own conclusions on the matter. Instead of a converted Dante, we would then have a Dante who presents himself as a Christian without truly being one or who at least rethinks his faith in terms of the new objections that could be raised against it. Let us not forget that the situation he faced was without precedent in the West, thanks especially to the rising tide of Aristotelianism, which was growing stronger day by day. This phenomenon is evident in the nearly contemporary work of Marsilius of Padua, which is already so different in its inspiration from the work of St. Thomas Aquinas. In the heat of this crisis, other possibilities were opening which would not have been thought of at an earlier time. The disaffection of certain thinkers for Christianity suddenly became a social phenomenon that could no longer be ignored and that fanned serious concerns.

We shall perhaps never know what Dante thought in his inmost heart of this problem to which, it seems, he wishes to draw our attention without telling us just how we could resolve it. But we do not need to know. The secret of his language, and thus the true novelty of his poem, resides elsewhere, in the unequaled splendor of the renewed Christianity of which he is the spokesman. Other writers, such as Marsilius of Padua, Petrarch, and Boccaccio, to name but a few, were almost as circumspect, but none of them were ever taken to be one of the glories of medieval Christendom. If Dante succeeded in getting himself to be spoken of as "the most Christian of poets,"[121] it is not because of his "avarice," which will always be open to discussion; it is because of his "prodigality," which leaves no room for any doubt and concerning which no one will ever be mistaken.

## Moral Certitude and Demonstration

Perhaps the persuasive force of the arguments we have marshaled to bring to light all that might be ambiguous about the Christianity of the *Comedy* will be judged to be very weak, particularly since the evidence is most often indirect and thus open to question. Does this mean that the pursuit should be abandoned and that one should renounce trying to attain clarity in this matter? Before replying in the affirmative, it would be good to reflect once again on the nature of the proofs at our disposal.

Since it was accepted from the start that we could not find the author at fault, we have no reason to complain that there are no more explicit statements on his part, nor to deplore the apparent weakness of certain arguments which, in his thinking, were not meant to lead to conclusions that were immune to attack. In the domain of theoretical science, one apodictic argument alone is without doubt preferable to a whole array of probable arguments, but in other instances the conviction produced by the accumulation of converging indices is tantamount in the long run to moral certitude. In no way do we hold that the few remarks we have made suffice of themselves to produce such a certitude. If they recommend themselves to our attention, it is only as a hypothesis. But all hypotheses are not equal. As a general rule, a hypothesis will be more acceptable if it allows us to reconcile a greater number of heterogeneous or discordant observations. The hypothesis we have championed has the advantage of acknowledging the Christian aspect of the *Comedy,* without obliging us to close our eyes to numerous elements of the poem which seem to

contradict it. The apologists of the poem's Christian orthodoxy must, on the other hand, acknowledge their impotence in the face of this opaque residue that again and again disturbs our rest and calls everything into question.

The truth is that this exclusively Christian interpretation is of rather recent date and does not have behind it the weight of an uninterrupted tradition going back to the Middle Ages. It is false to say that Dante's contemporaries, who were better situated than we to know him, completely overlooked this dark background of his thinking. As we have seen, even the brilliance of his renown never succeeded in overcoming the doubts that for centuries continued to hover over him. Like Pascal, though for other motives, he was never fully integrated into the main current of Christian thought. The objection to Pascal was that he did not place sufficient confidence in reason and so contributed to the dismantling of the cosmology upon which theology had for long sought to lean. If Dante has always been the subject of misgivings, it is not for his having denigrated human reason; it is rather for having esteemed it too highly.

Let us take a further step and suppose that the ecclesiastical authorities were aware of the situation. Could they say so publicly? Such an avowal would only have served to make Dante a sworn enemy of the Church, something which would not have served their cause and even done it great harm. It was better to feign ignorance and act as though there was no cause for concern. By treating an enemy as a friend and giving him the honors that seemed due him the authorities avoided any new hassles. Here was a solution that could satisfy all of the parties involved.

In his *Life of Dante* Boccaccio tells of an incident that suggests that this is just how this matter came to be handled. A few years after the poet's death, one of his adversaries, Cardinal Bertrand du Pouget, the papal legate in Lombardy, heard of the use that the supporters of Louis of Bavaria were making of Dante's *Monarchy*. At first he thought of having Dante's mortal remains burned so as to make of him a posthumous heretic. He was dissuaded from his plan, not by Dante's friends, as might be expected, but by his own friends, who immediately understood the immense harm such an act would have caused. Either most people would have found it unjust, or else a secret no one wanted to divulge would be revealed to all the world.[122]

In the same way one can explain the fate reserved at the time to Guido Vernani's *De reprobatione Monarchiae,* in which for the first time Dante is accused of Averroism. The worth of the arguments on which the accusation rests matters little. What is mysterious is the silence that surrounded this little treatise in the wake of its publication. Vernani's name is not to be found anywhere in the catalogues of Dominican authors of the Middle Ages.[123] The omission would be less flagrant if these lists were less complete and if they did not include the names of so many authors who were hardly more meritorious and are today largely forgotten. Despite his vigorous defense of religious orthodoxy and papal policy, the author of the *De reprobatione Monarchiae* seems to have been himself the object of his superiors' tacit reprobation. Perhaps they simply thought he was mistaken in his views, but in that case all they had to do was to say so, as was done in the case of so many of his contemporaries. It is more probable that, although they sensed that he was on the right track, his superiors were against him because he spoke too openly. Vernani's treatise was rejected not because its author was mistaken regarding Dante's intentions, but because he saw them only too well. He did not understand that exposing the theses of the *Monarchy* to broad daylight was to run a new risk for the Church. Unfortunately, the religious authorities could not allow themselves the luxury of an adversary of Dante's proportions. Vernani would have had greater success if he had been more perspicacious or less perspicacious. He had succeeded in piercing the veil beneath which Dante hides his thought, but not enough to grasp the subtle lesson to be drawn from the use of such a veil.

## Notes

1 Philippe Guiberteau, *L'Énigme de Dante* (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1973), 264. On Dante's so-called "intellectual crisis," see also Étienne Gilson, *Dante the Philosopher,* trans. David Moore (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1949), 94–100; Erich Auerbach, *Dante: Poet of the Secular World,* trans. Ralph Manheim (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961), 70–71; and Francis Fergusson, *Dante's Drama of the* Mind (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1953), 78–79, 99–104.

2 See Dante, *Purgatorio* 20, 127–129.

3 See Dante, *Purgatorio* 21, 55–72.

4 See Dante, *Purgatorio* 21, 82–102.

5 See Dante, *Purgatorio* 21, 103–136.

6 See Dante, *Purgatorio* 22, 19–24.

7 See Dante, *Purgatorio* 22, 25–54.

8 See Dante, *Purgatorio* 22, 70–72; and Virgil, *Eclogues* IV, 1–5. On the Christian appropriation of Virgil's prophecy, see Jerome Carcopino, *Virgile et le mystère de la quatrième Églogue* (Paris: L'Artisan du livre, 1943), 201; and Pierre Courcelle, "Les exégèses chrétiennes de la quatrième Églogue," *Revue des études anciennes* 59 (1957): 294–319.

9 Dante, *Purgatorio* 22, 90.

10 See Dante, *Purgatorio* 22, 88–89; 21, 92–93; 22, 55–60.

11 See Dante, *Purgatorio* 22, 28–39. The letters appear in the following sequence: *V(eramente), O(r), L(a), E.* The usual method of deciphering consists in taking the first letter of the group, followed by the last, then the second, then the next to last, and so on. See Walter Arensberg, *The Cryptography of Dante* (New York: Knopf, 1921), 56.

12 Dante, *Purgatorio* 22, 28–30.

13 Virgil, *Aeneid* III, 56–57.

14 Dante, *Purgatorio* 22, 40–41.

15 See Dante, *Purgatorio* 22, 38. The verb intendere, to understand, often means in the Comedy "to penetrate the hidden meaning of the text." See Grandgent, *La Divina* Commedia, 506. Grandgent refers to an analogous usage in *Inferno* 4, 51; and 24, 74; *Purgatorio* 19, 137; and *Paradiso* 14, 126.

16 See Dante, *Purgatorio* 10, 114–115.

17 See Dante, *Purgatorio* 22, 41.

18 The word *"oikonomia"* seems to have been used for the first time in this sense by the Fathers of the Church. On the various uses of the term among the Church Fathers, see G. L. Prestige, *God in Patristic Thought* (London: S.P.C.K., 1969).

19 See Dante, *Purgatorio* 22, 92–93. On *acedia,* see Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologiae II-II, q. 35.

20 See Dante, *Purgatorio* 22, 67–68.

21 The problem raised in canto 22 has been foreshadowed, it seems, in the interlude at the end of the preceding canto. Statius has just voiced his profound esteem for Virgil, unaware that one of the two people with whom he is speaking is Virgil himself, whom he would so liked to have known personally, even at the cost of prolonging his stay in Purgatory by a whole year (see *Purgatorio* 21, 200–102). Dante is on the verge of revealing the name of his illustrious companion but is held back by a signal from Virgil. For a few moments he is torn between the two poets, one of whom begs him to speak and the other enjoins him to be silent. In the face of Statius's impatience, Virgil gives in and the revelation takes place. The meaning of this very amusing but apparently inconsequential little game of hide and seek is not evident at first sight. However, if one bears in mind that the *Comedy* is composed in such a way that sequences of episodes are interwoven, in imitation of the overlapping rhyme scheme in each canto (aba, bcb, cdc), one may be tempted to see here a subtle anticipation of the antithesis between speech and silence that will shortly be made fully evident.

22 See Dante, *Purgatorio* 22, 127; and 24, 143.

23 See Dante, *Purgatorio* 27, 46–48, 85–86.

24 See Dante, *Purgatorio* 28, 82, 145.

25 Dante, *Purgatorio* 30, 55, 63.

26 Dante, *Purgatorio* 30, 49–51.

27 See Dante, *Convivio* I, 2, 12–14, in which Dante explains at length why and when it is sometimes necessary to speak of oneself. He cites two examples, Boethius and St. Augustine. Boethius sought "under the pretext of finding consolation, to defend himself against the everlasting disgrace of his exile by showing that it had been unjust." Augustine in his *Confessions* spoke of himself to instruct his readers, for in narrating "the development of his life, which progressed from not good to good, from good to better, and from better to best, he gives us example and instruction which no account by a mere witness, however faithful, could have supplied."

28 See Arensberg, *Cryptography,* 55–56. Note that the letter "d" is written as "di" in Italian.

29 Dante, *Purgatorio* 30, 58–60. This detestable ego, which Dante only half suppresses, shows through again in the unusual rhyme scheme found verses 55 to 69. Of these fifteen rhymes, twelve end uniformly in "a." The series is interrupted by only three rhymes in "*io*" (*mio, appario, rio*), the Italian "I," which again draws the reader's attention to the person of the author. It is to be noted that the pilgrim's gaze rests obligingly on the "veil" that covers the face of Beatrice without fully concealing it from his view: "I saw the lady who had first appeared to me beneath the veils of the angelic flowers look at me across the stream. Although the veil she wore—down from her head, which was encircled by Minerva's leaves—did not allow her to be seen distinctly" (*Purgatorio* 30, 64–69). See also, earlier in the same canto: "a woman showed herself to me; above a white veil, she was crowned with olive boughs; her cape was green; her dress beneath, flame-red" (*Purgatorio* 30, 31–33).

30 See Dante, Purgatorio 22, 35, in which Statius reproaches himself for his lack of measure, "*dismisura*."

31 See Dante, *Purgatorio* 12, 110; 15, 38; 17, 68–69; 27, 8.

32 See Dante, *Purgatorio* 22, 6; and 24, 151–154.

33 See Grandgent, *La Divina Commedia,* 504.

34 Dante, *Purgatorio* 29, 3. These words are spoken at the very moment when the Church makes its official appearance in the poem, under the form of a chariot accompanied by the virtues and sacred writers.

35 See Dante, *Paradiso* 17, 104–105.

36 See Dante, *Inferno* 10, 130–132.

37 See Dante, *Paradiso* 16, 46–154.

38 Dante, *Paradiso* 17, 27.

39 Dante, *Paradiso* 17, 46–54.

40 See Dante, *Paradiso* 17, 55–69.

41 See Dante, *Paradiso* 17, 70–75.

42 See Dante, *Paradiso* 17, 76–90.

43 See Dante, *Purgatorio* 17, 97–99.

44 Dante, *Paradiso* 17, 109–111.

45 See Dante, *Paradiso* 17, 116–117.

46 Dante, *Paradiso* 17, 118–120.

47 See Dante, *Paradiso* 17, 1–6. On the myth of Phaeton, which is found in several places in the *Comedy* (*Inferno* 17, 107–108; *Purgatorio* 4, 72; and 29, 118; *Paradiso* 31, 124–125), see J. Pépin, *Dante et la tradition,* 111–114.

48 See Dante, *Paradiso* 17, 124–129.

49 Dante, *Paradiso* 17, 130–135.

50 See Dante, *Inferno* 10, 13–15.

51 See Dante, *Inferno* 10, 46–48.

52 Dante, *Inferno* 10, 51.

53 Dante, *Inferno* 10, 81.

54 See Michele Barbi, *Dante: Vita, opere e fortuna* (Florence: Sansoni, 1933), 21–22; and Umberto Cosmo, *Vita di Dante* (Florence: La Nuova Italia, 1965), 92–94, 100.

55 See L. Valli, *Il languaggio segreto di Dante e dei fedeli d'amore* (Rome: Optima, 1928), 434–435.

56 See Boccaccio, *Decameron* III, 7, 8; and Dante, *Purgatorio* 2, 106–114.

57 Boccaccio, *Decameron* III, 7, 34–43; see Dante, *Paradiso* 11, 124–139; and 29, 82–126. On Dante's critique of the mendicant orders, see Gilson, *Dante,* 242–252.

58 See Boccaccio, *Life of Dante,* ch. 2; and Leonardo Bruni Aretino, *The Life of Dante,* ch. 2.

59 Boccaccio, *Decameron,* I ed. V. Branca (Florence: F. Le Monnier, 1960), 379 n. 2.

60 See Dante, *Paradiso* 6, 31–33, 97–108; and 28, 46–54.

61 See Dante, *Convivio* I, 1, 7–15. Dante adds that the bread he confects is "made from my own grain" (1, 2, 15). See *Paradiso* 10, 25: "I have prepared your fare; now feed yourself."

62 See Dante, *Paradiso* 25, 7–8.

63 See A. Pézard, *Oeuvres complètes,* 939.

64 See Dante, *Inferno* 10, 13–15.

65 See Dante, *Inferno* 10, 32–36, 73.

66 See Boccaccio, *Life of Dante,* ch. 16. The *Monarchy* was condemned in 1329 and placed on the Index in 1554. It was not removed until 1881.

67 See G. H. Putnam, *The Censorship of the Church of Rome,* II (New York: Putnam, 1909), 308. The Supplement to the Index published at Lisbon in 1581 prohibited the reading of the *Comedy* until such time as the text would be officially expurgated. At its chapter meeting held in Florence in 1335, the Roman province of the Dominicans forbade its study to all of its religious. Robert Bellarmine's defense of Dante, found in his *De controversiis christianae fidei,* is concerned chiefly with controversies of the time between Protestants and Catholics. In his encyclical letter *In praeclara,* published on the sixth centenary of Dante's death, Pope Benedict XV used the occasion to protest ideas then in fashion that belief in God is harmful to the arts and sciences. On Dante and the Index and on papal testimonies to Dante, which are all of relatively recent date, see A. Valensin, *Le christianisme de Dante* (Paris: Aubier, 1954), 137–138, 141–142, 183–185.

68 P. Guiberteau, *L'Énigme,* 59.

69 "This is a most graceful and useful figure, to which we may give the name dissimulation. Its strategy is similar to that of a wise soldier who attacks a castle on one side in order to draw off the defences from another, for the intention to bring help and the assault are not directed to the same side" (Dante, *Convivio* III, 10, 7–8).

70 P. Renucci, *Dante* (Paris: Hatier, 1958), 136.

71 See Dante, *Paradiso* 2, 1–18.

72 See also Dante, *Vita Nuova,* 40.

73 Dante, *Paradiso* 24, 46–51. On the structure of the scholastic disputation and the roles of the master and bachelor, see M. D. Chenu, *Toward Understanding Saint Thomas,* trans. A. M. Landry and D. Hughes (Chicago: Regnery, 1964), 88–91.

74 See Dante, *Paradiso* 24, 70–78.

75 See Dante, *Paradiso* 24, 85–96.

76 See Dante, *Paradiso* 24, 97–102.

77 See Dante, *Paradiso* 24, 103–108; see also Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles* 1, 6.

78 See Dante, *Paradiso* 24, 151.

79 Dante, *Paradiso* 17, 139–142. See also *Purgatorio* 3, 79–102; and *Paradiso* 13, 112–113; 20, 88–93.

80 Dante, *Paradiso* 24, 52, 85, 122–123.

81 See Dante, *Paradiso* 24, 148, 154.

82 See Dante, *Paradiso* 24, 81.

83 See Dante, *Purgatorio* 32, 124–141; and *Paradiso* 6, 94–96; 20, 55–60.

84 Dante, *Paradiso* 24, 111.

85 See Dante, *Paradiso* 24, 1–9; and Luke 16.19–31. The same analogy also appears in *Convivio* I, 1, 3.

86 Dante, *Paradiso* 24, 2.

87 See R. W. Southern, *Western Society and the Church in the Middle Ages* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970), 148–149; and Friedrich Gontard, *The Chair of St. Peter: A History of the Papacy,* trans. A. J. and E. F. Peeler (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1964), 302.

88 See Dante, *Paradiso* 24, 25–27. Dante says often that he is at a loss to convey his thought. See, for example, *Inferno* 4, 145–147; 28, 1–6; *Paradiso* 1, 4–9; 10, 43–48; 33, 55–57; *Convivio* III, 4, 4, 11–13; and *Letter to Cangrande,* 29. But perhaps one ought to wonder whether the alleged impotence in such cases is not rather feigned, as Dante suggests in *Paradiso* 4, 49–57. What passes just about everywhere today as Dante's mysticism might be but one aspect of the philosophical allegory of which we have already cited a number of examples.

89 See Dante, *Inferno* 27, 85–90.

90 Dante, *Paradiso* 24, 60.

91 See Dante, *Paradiso* 25, 1–12.

92 Dante, *Paradiso* 25, 91–93. See also *Inferno* 16, 127–128, in which Dante solemnly swears, not by the Bible, but by his own book.

93 See Isaiah 61.7 and 10; and Bonaventure, *Breviloquium* VII, 7.

94 See Dante, *Paradiso* 26, 1–6.

95 See Dante, *Paradiso* 26, 25–48.

96 Dante, *Paradiso* 26, 55–63, slightly rearranged.

97 Dante's indebtedness here to the Book of Revelation does not seem to differ from what he already knew through Aristotle, to whom he alludes in *Paradiso* 26, 37–39: "My mind discerns this truth, made plain by him who demonstrates to me that the first love of the eternal beings is their Maker." Aristotle's authority is not invoked, on the other hand, when it comes to hope, which is not properly speaking a pagan virtue. For

a literal interpretation of cantos 24, 25, and 26, see A. Valensin, who concludes his discussion by saying that "all these declarations are rigorously orthodox. What right does one have to cast doubt on them and ascribe secret thoughts to Dante that are incompatible with them?" (*Le christianisme de Dante* [Paris: Aubier, 1954], 27–31).

98 See Dante, *Paradiso* 26, 109–114.

99 See Dante, *Paradiso* 26, 115–117.

100 See Dante, *Paradiso* 26, 118–120.

101 See Dante, *Paradiso* 26, 121–123.

102 See Dante, *Paradiso* 26, 124–138.

103 See Dante, *Paradiso* 26, 139–142.

104 On these various chronologies, see V. Grumel, "La chronologie," in *Traité d' études byzantines*, I ed. P. Lemerle (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1958), 3–25.

105 See Augustine, *The City of God* XII, 11, and XVIII, 40; and Jerome, *In epistolam ad Titum* 1, 2.

106 See Orosius, *Historiae adversus paganos* I, 1. Orosius states that 3,184 passed between Adam and Abraham and 2,015 years from Abraham to the birth of Christ, for a total of 5,199 years. Orosius no doubt follows Eusebius, who gives 5,199 as the year of Christ's birth.

107 Dante, *Paradiso* 26, 118–121.

108 "*Quidam tradunt eos esse in paradiso septem horas*" (Peter Comestor, *Historia scholastica, Liber Genesis,* 24 [P.L. 198, col. 1075]). For reasons of fittingness, the expulsion from the earthly paradise was sometimes made to coincide with the death of Christ at three in the afternoon. See Pézard, *Oeuvres,* 1604.

109 See Dante, *Purgatorio* 28, 2, 12, 16; and 33, 104.

110 This date is known from *Inferno* 21, 112–114: "Five hours from this hour yesterday, one thousand and two hundred sixty-six years passed since that roadway was shattered here." In line 112 modern editions uniformly adopt the reading of 1266, *"mille dugento con sessanta sei."* Several manuscripts, however, have "*mille dugent'un con sessanta sei*," that is, 1267. The latter reading, which is the more difficult, could well be authentic. Unfortunately, we do not have Dante's own manuscript to verify the text. See the critical edition of G. Petrocchi, *La Commedia secondo l'antica vulgata* (Milan: Mandadori, 1966), 358. See also Rodolfo Benini, *Scienza, religione ed arte nell' astronomia di Dante* (Rome: Reale academia d'Italia, 1939), 25–26.

111 See Dante, *Paradiso* 9, 39–40, in which it is said that the fame of Folco of Marseilles "will not die away before this hundredth year [*centesimo,* that is, the year 1300] returns five times [*s'incinqua*]." The text goes on to say, "see then if man should not seek excellence—that his first life bequeath another life." Dante likely intended to show not that Folco's fame would last another 500 years—there is no reason why he would choose that number arbitrarily—but that 1,300 should be multiplied by 5, for a total of 6,500 years corresponding to the preceding 6,500 years. According to Benini, this detail is confirmed in *Paradiso* 18, 71–79 and 27, 142–148, which also assume a future duration of 6,500 years. In the first passage the letter DIL formed by the lights would signify 549 (D = 500 and IL = 49). Assuming that in 100 the world was 6,500 years old, Jupiter, where Dante is at the moment, had already begun its 549th rotation around the sun, at the rate of 11 years and 316 days for each rotation. Other details suggest that there remained an equal number of rotations for Jupiter to complete. In the second passage, Beatrice, deploring the absence of government on earth, asserts ironically that "before a thousand years have passed (and January is unwintered by day's hundredth part, which they neglect below), this high sphere shall shine so, the Providence, long waited for, will turn the sterns to where the prows now are, so that the fleet run straight." The neglected "hundredth part" is apparently an allusion to the thirteen minutes or hundredth part of a day overlooked by the Julian calendar, the cumulative of which would eventually result in spring beginning in early January. Without Gregory XIII's reform of the calendar, approximately 6,500 years would have to pass for that to happen. See Benini, *Scienza,* 31–32.

112 In the second verse of the opening canto, Dante abruptly passes from the plural to the singular: *"mi ritrovai per una selva oscura."* This should not prevent us from thinking that he also wanted to speak of his own life at the same time. He was 35 years old in the year 1300 and had thus attained what the *Convivio* refers to as the highest point in life. See *Convivio* IV, 23, 9. See also Isaiah 38.10: "In the noontide of my days I must depart; I am consigned to the gates of Sheol for the rest of my years."

113 Even the words Dante uses suggest that Adam's identity could be other than it appears to be: "And the primal soul—much as an animal beneath a cover (*coperto*) stirs, so that its feelings are made evident when what enfolds it (*invoglia*) follows all its movements—showed me, through that which covered him (*coperta*) with what rejoicing he was coming to delight me" (*Paradiso* 26, 97–102). Note the acrostic "I(o) Dante" in the initial letters of these two and the adjoining tercets. See Arensberg, *Cryptography,* 58.

114 See Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* II-II, q. 163, art. 2.

115 Dante, *Paradiso* 26, 115—117.

116 The views Dante ascribes to Adam resemble closely enough those he expresses elsewhere in his own name and according to which the fall of the first couple would have been caused by their temerity. That temerity of theirs made it impossible for them to bear the veil beneath which they should have stayed: "just indignation made me rebuke the arrogance of Eve because, where earth and heaven were obedient, a solitary woman, just created, found any veil at all beyond endurance" (*Purgatorio* 29, 23–27). It is sometimes supposed that the veil which Eve had the insolence to reject in eating the forbidden fruit is the veil of ignorance, given that the fruit came from the tree of knowledge. See J. D. Sinclair, *Dante's Paradiso* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1961), 386 n. 2. We have seen, however, that with Dante the word "veil" almost always refers to some kind of disguise. One would think that Adam and Eve were expelled from the earthly paradise less for having sought knowledge they did not possess than for not having failed to conceal the knowledge which they did possess.

117 Dante, *Paradiso* 26, 124–138.

118 See Dante, *Inferno* 31, 46–81, in which Nimrod is depicted as a giant whose "face appeared . . . as broad and long as Rome can claim for its St. Peter's pine cone" (58–59) and "through whose wicked thought one single language cannot serve the world" (77–78).

119 See Dante, *Paradiso* 26, 127–129.

120 It is noteworthy that the connection among the ideas is about the same in both instances. In *Purgatorio,* Eden is depicted as a sort of image of the golden age or age of Saturn, of which the poets of old sang (see *Purgatorio* 28, 136–144). There follows the Church and her cortege in canto 29, the encounter with Beatrice in canto 30, and the birth of *"Adam subtilis."* See *Purgatorio* 32, 37: "'Adam,' I heard all of them murmuring"; and 33, 142–145: "From that most holy wave I now returned to Beatrice, remade, as new trees are renewed when they bring forth new boughs, I was pure and prepared to climb unto the stars." In *Paradiso,* Dante first crosses the heaven of Saturn, the dwelling place of contemplative spirits, which is also of the color gold (see *Purgatorio* 21, 25–30). He then ascends to the heaven of the fixed stars, where he appears before the Church and her representatives in cantos 23 to 26 and reveals himself beneath the traits of a new Adam, theoretically adorned with the theological virtues.

121 *"His autem christianissimus poeta Dantes poetriam ad theologiam studuit revocare"* (Benvenuto da Imola, *Comentum super Dantis Comoediam,* introduction, 1, 9). See Boccaccio, *Life,* ch. 14, and, on the connection between poetry and theology, ch. 10.

122 See Boccaccio, Life, ch. 16.

123 See Matteini, *Il più antico oppositore,* 9; and U. Mariani, "I trattati politici di Guido Vernani," *Il giornale dantesco* 30 (1927): 18–30.

# CHAPTER SEVEN

## *The Theory of the Double Truth*

### Philosophical Allegory and Jewish Kabbalah

The new philosophical allegory which Dante and his imitators so ably handled brings to mind the Jewish kabbalah, which appeared in the south of France near the end of the twelfth century and from there spread rapidly in Spain and elsewhere. [1] Despite numerous resemblances, the two are nonetheless distinct and even distant from one another. Far from being on the fringes of the Talmudic tradition, the kabbalah is at the very heart of it. It has its source in the Talmud and gives it a more personal and specifically mystical character.[2] In contrast to Christian mysticism, Jewish mysticism often resembles initiatory knowledge, based on numerology and isosephy, such that it seems to be akin to the esotericism of the philosophers.[3] But kabbalistic doctrines are occult only in that they claim to belong to a primordial tradition that is to be transmitted orally to a small number of qualified disciples. In principle they contain nothing that is not perfectly orthodox and could not be transmitted to others if one wished and if it were permitted to do so. The instrument employed to communicate them is not, in the words of Gershom Scholem, philosophical allegory, but symbolism, by means of which one seeks to fathom the depths of Scripture and penetrate more deeply the secrets of the divine mystery.[4] Never in all this is there any question of proposing a teaching contrary to what the Jewish community accepted.

The thought of the new philosophers, by contrast, separates itself clearly from that of their community, even if its orthodox exterior at times risks misleading us. We find ourselves here in the presence of the curious doctrine known by the name of “double truth” to which Tempier alluded and which has occasioned such diverse interpretations for more than a century.[5] According to Tempier, certain masters of the arts faculty would have taught that two contradictory propositions could be true at the same time when looked at from the point of view of reason or the perspective of faith or, inversely, that the same proposition could be at the same true and false, according to the same two points of view.[6] The truth would then be opposed to itself, and man would be free to accept as a philosopher what he rejects as a believer.

Whatever it was Tempier had in mind, it is quite certain that no one in the Middle Ages subscribed to such stupidities.[7] To the best of my knowledge, the only author apart from Tempier to speak of a double truth, *“duplex veritas,”* is Thomas Aquinas, but he meant something altogether different by that term. For him there is a natural truth, which human reason is able to discover by its own power, and a supernatural truth in the strict sense, which is known only through divine revelation.[8] Therein lies the great novelty of Thomistic thought. Augustine and his medieval disciples held a rather different conception of the connections between faith and reason. They spoke of only one wisdom, *“una sapientia,”* in which all that was of value in pagan philosophy found a place.[9] Human wisdom remains partial and moreover subject to widespread error. It does not suffice unto itself and can only be fully understood in the light of the whole that is Christian wisdom.

The practical consequences in each instance are not without interest. For Augustine, the Christian has the right to appropriate the spoil of the Egyptians, that is, the human sciences, but on condition of having first celebrated the passover, which for him has become the immolated Christ.[10] In keeping to the same image, and without forcing it unduly, we might be tempted to say that Thomas Aquinas is more willing to defer the accomplishment of the passover until the Egyptians have been despoiled and the Promised Land completely occupied. The first article of *Summa Theologiae* asks whether, beyond the philosophical disciples, man needs any other teaching, that is, sacred doctrine, in order to attain his end. Consequently, according to the reply given in the body of the article, there are two distinct orders, the order of nature, which is complete in itself, and the order of grace, which, while not required by nature, perfects nature by assigning it an end to which it could not aspire or even know of without the aid of revelation.[11] There could be no contradiction between natural truth and supernatural truth, since both stem from God as the author of both nature and

grace.[12] It also follows that man is no longer for any reason free to reject divine revelation once it is made known to him.

Everyone did not see things the same way, however. The doctrine of the double truth, by whatever name one calls it, did indeed exist if by that one understands that other authors in the name of reason repudiated certain doctrines that they nevertheless presented as true, not because they themselves held them, but because they appeared useful and in keeping with the requirements of society. There could be no doubt that truth remains one in itself. Unfortunately, not all minds are equally capable of grasping it or benefiting from it. When circumstances call for it, it is fitting to substitute a salutary error or, if one prefers, a more practical truth for a truth that might do harm and to do this out concern for that truth.

### The Origin of the Doctrine of the "Double Truth"

To eliminate all misunderstanding, a few words are in order concerning the origin of this writing with a double meaning, the ins and outs of which we are far from understanding in the current state of historical research. The apostles of an esoteric Dante which enjoyed a considerable vogue from the early nineteenth century to the years following the First World War—and it has not yet died out—strove to prove that there was in the Middle Ages a secret sect the adepts of which had recourse to a conventional language (*gergo*) in order to escape the persecutions aimed at them.[13] Every term in this argot would have had, in addition to its usual meaning, an occult meaning, known only to the initiates.[14] The doctrines that were in this way propagated in secret have been attributed to astonishingly diverse sources, such as Hermes the Egyptian, Zoroaster, Pythagoras, the mystery religions, the oral traditons of Rabbinic Judaism or primitive Christianity, the Gnostic milieus of late Antiquity, the Albigensians, the Paulicians, Joachim of Flora and the Joachimites, or the Order of the Templars.[15]

Modern scholarship has rightly looked askance at these theories and the often contrived arguments that have been proferred in their defense. The existence of such a sect has never been established. Moreover, one can sense immediately how very artificial or stilted is the systematic use of a vocabulary with double meaning to express ideas that were at all cost to be kept secret. [16] The very idea of a universal Freemasonry that would have harbored just about every kind of dissident, the real or imaginary reformers and heretics of the Middle Ages, from the Vaudois and Cathars to the Patarins and Templars through the kabbalists, troubadours, and *fedeli d'amore,* is the antithesis of what Dante and others like him thought on this matter. Even if it exacts an uncommon effort of reflection on the part of the reader, the *Comedy* is accessible to everyone. In any event, a hermetic dictionary is not what will make its secrets known to us.

There is no need to go searching in the obscure recesses of ancient or medieval history to know where Dante's ideas and method come from. The source which nurtures them is more noble and infinitely better known, the ancient Platonic tradition which we spoke of with reference to Al-Farabi and his Arab or Jewish disciples, even if we still do not know through what precise way Dante could have come to know it. Plato did not express himself any more clearly on this matter than in his Seventh Letter, in which he says explicitly:

> But this much at any rate I can affirm about any present or future writers who pretend to knowledge of the matters with which I concern myself, whether they claim to have been taught by me or by a third party or to have discovered the truth for themselves; in my judgment it is impossible that they should have any understanding of the subject. No treatise by me concerning it exists or ever will exist. It is not something that can be put into words like other branches of learning; only after long partnership in a common life devoted to this very thing does truth flash upon the soul, like a flame kindled by a leaping spark, and once it is born there it nourishes itself thereafter. Yet this too I know, that if there were to be any oral or written teaching on this matter it would best come from me, and that it is I who would feel most deeply the harm caused by an inferior exposition. If I thought that any adequate spoken or written account could be given to the world at large, what more glorious life-work could I have undertaken than to put into writing what would be of great benefit to mankind and to bring the nature of reality to light for all to see? But I do not think that the attempt to put these matters into words would be to men's advantage, except to those few who can find out the truth for themselves with a little guidance; the rest could be filled either with an unjustifiable and quite improper contempt for their fellows or with a lofty and vain expectation, based on the belief that they were in possession of some mighty secret.[17]

It matters little that some editors have questioned the letter's authenticity, wrongly it seems, since the same ideas are found in almost identical terms in a number of dialogues, particularly in the last part of the *Phaedrus,* which treats in great detail the relative merits of oral and written instruction.[18] If a choice had to be made between these two modes of teaching, Plato without any doubt would prefer the first, since it allows the teacher to judge the student's aptitudes, to follow his progress, and to resolve on the spot any difficulties he may have.[19] Nevertheless this oral teaching has the disadvantage of being addressed to a small number of immediate disciples. To allow a wider audience to benefit from his knowledge, the teacher will necessarily have recourse to writing. But in this case he will no longer have the possibility of engaging in a dialogue with his readers. Moreover, his books risk falling into the hands of any reader whatsoever.[20] In their author's absence, they have a hard time defending themselves and always use the same words to answer any questions asked of them.[21]

The problem does admit of some resolution. If he is skillful, the author will know how to handle the situation by not allowing his thought to show on the surface of the text, but nevertheless seeing to it that it can be seen through a careful analysis of the mode in which he presents it. The character of a Platonic dialogue is precisely to imitate oral teaching by reproducing as much as possible the conditions under which it takes place. There is no need to go looking for the content of this oral teaching outside the dialogue, in traditions that are now lost and perhaps never existed. The content is to be found in the text itself, under the form of a *"eggraphos agraphon,"* to use a phrase coined by Clement of Alexandria but fully in keeping with the thought of the *Phaedrus,* on which he drew.[22] To truly know it, we have only to follow the action of the dialogue step by step, not as passive or detached spectators, but in the manner of a paticipant who finds himself constantly obliged to take a position on the subject at hand in order to avoid the snares that are set for him. Every Platonic dialogue "necessarily" contains an element of irony or graceful pleasantry, *"paidia,"* whose purpose it is at one and the same time to reveal and to conceal its deeper meaning.[23]

To better understand this Platonic writing, let us return to the interpretation al-Farabi gave of it in his *Philosophy of Plato and Aristotle.* According to al-Farabi, an appropriate distinction can be made between Socrates's method and Plato's. This distinction is directly linked to the way each man conducted himself in relation to actual cities. Plato rightly saw that it was impossible to live virtuously in the cities of his time, but he also understood that these cities would never support such a critique of their way of life. Consequently he asked hismelf whether it was not better to abandon his project and resign himself to behaving as everyone else did. This is exactly the same dilemma that Socrates confronted. Faced with the hostility of his fellow citizens, Socrates had to choose between conformity and life or nonconformity and death. Rather than renounce the only life that seemed to him worthy of a rational being, he preferred to suffer the death penalty.[24]

No one would accept that this is a suitable solution to the problem of the relations between the philosopher and the society that harbors him. At least Plato did not think it was. Deeply convinced that the evils that afflicted the men of his time would not disappear until the day when cities themselves would change, he undertook to found "another city,"[25] a city that still had the limitation of existing only "in speech," the city he deals with in the *Republic.* It remained for him to explain how the ideal he trumpeted could be translated into reality.[26] This led him to take up again or "repeat" the exposition that he had presented of his master's thought.[27]

This repetition is in fact a profound modification of the Socratic method. Socrates had engaged in a scientific inquiry into justice and virtue with the aim of helping his fellow citizens become aware of the ignorance in which they lived. He succeeded admirably with the intellectual elite of his time, but he had no success whatsoever with the multitude. To the extent it differs from Plato's, Socrates's method is intransigent in its resolute opposition to any compromise and its disdain of any concession to human weakness. To avoid the "grave perils" to which he would be exposed had he followed it, Plato had the idea to complete it by another method, that of the rhetorician Thrasymachus, which must "necessarily" be used whenever the philosopher has to address nonphilosophers.[28]

By combining these two methods Plato found a way of acting that was less revolutionary but on the other hand more efficacious. Acknowledging that the righting of current opinions would only take place little by little, he was all the more concerned to use moderation in his dealings with the city and was content to suggest other opinions that, while novel and closer to truth, did not flagrantly contradict the prejudices of the multitude.[29] His dialogues must be read in the light of this observation. They do not say all that he thought regarding the problems he discusses, but neither are they completely silent.

Such is the nature of this political mode, the idea of which is not to be found in the Latin world before the end of the thirteenth century. Even St. Thomas, who had a bookish knowledge of it through certain ancient authors such as Cicero, Boethius, and Pseudo-Dionysius, did not deal with it and merely stated that it was no longer in use among his contemporaries: *"apud modernos est inconsuetus."*[30] One can even ask whether he understood it aright. Although he speaks of it a number of times, he seems to have seen in it no more than a pedagogical device used to make the truth more appreciated by making it more difficult to attain and keeping it at a distance from those who would be unworthy of it.[31]

Twenty-five years later, the method whose usefulness Thomas Aquinas no longer saw was rehabilitated by other authors who did not share his views and did not have as he did a sense of a preestablished harmony between the data of revelation and the achievements of human reason alone. There is some irony in the story of this recuperation. Once medieval Christian society had at last triumphed over the enemies that threatened it from without, it now had living in its midst a growing number of thinkers who went their own way and steered further and further away from the path forged by official Christianity. This time the adversary was more to be feared since it went about disguised among the ranks of the faithful and was more difficult to repel.

In a hundred different ways Dante points the finger at this adversary who is so careful to remain incognito. Readers of the *Comedy* have long been intrigued by the presence among the elect in *Paradiso* of a little known hero of the Trojan War named Ripheus, the only pagan to enjoy the beatific vision.[32] One can understand why Dante would want Trajan to be saved,[33] since, according to legend, he had been restored to life by Pope Gregory the Great and had the time to make an act of faith before his eternal destiny was definitively fixed.[34] But Ripheus? No Christian had ever mentioned him.[35] Virgil does indeed praise his justice,[36] but other more famous and no less virtuous pagans could just as easily have been chosen to illustrate the unfathomable mystery of predestination the *Comedy* underscores at this point. But is it in fact Ripheus's justice, as has always been thought, that led Dante to place him among the blessed? Despite its brevity, Virgil's account points out another trait that is worth bearing in mind. Ripheus belonged to a small band of Trojan warriors who in the heat of battle disguised themselves as Greeks to fight against the Greeks.[37] Ripheus's justice is not his only claim to heavenly glory; it is of a piece with a certain duplicity that brings to mind the sort employed by other, more contemporaneous warriors who did not hesitate to disguise themselves as Christians to fight against Christians.

To speak of adversaries or warriors is to go too far, however. Contrary to what took place in modern times, the new philosophers did not attack the Christian faith nor did they seek to discredit it. Most of them recognized its greatness and usefulness and strove in their own way to ensure its perpetuation. In this way they were faithful to the tradition to which they consciously adhered. In their minds their goal would be met if they succeeded in getting this religion, by which the West had lived for centuries and to which it owed so much, to become at once more human and more spiritual by renouncing its worldly ambitions.[38] There was no going back to the pagan gods who were long since dead, and the time had not yet come to give serious thought to the possibility of a social order founded on atheism. It is indeed true to say that there were no rationalists during this period,[39] if by "rationalist" is meant someone who dreams of a rational society whose advent requires a ceaseless struggle against religion under all of its forms.

In other circumstances, of course, the twisted means our philosophers employed to arrive at their goals would pass for hypocrisy pure and simple. However, apart from the fact that they were imposed on them by circumstances they did not think were of their making, these means allowed them to spare the rightful authorities the embarrassment of a public confrontation they could well do without. It is not up to anyone, as the *Convivio* said, to reprimand a superior or a close friend. Propriety demands that the appropriate exterior marks of respect be shown to a father or a master, even if he is guilty of some indignity.[40] In spite of all he held against him, Dante himself found the outrage Boniface VIII had to put up with from his enemies at Anagni unforgivable, [41] and if he pleaded vigorously for the independence of the imperial power, he always demanded that it render to the Church the homage of reverential piety which a first-born owed to his father.[42]

Such considerations encourage us to be less harsh in judging the "most praiseworthy and even necessary" method by which Dante was able to address the general public in terms whose meaning was reserved to a small number of reasonable and loyal friends: "A figure such as this in rhetoric is most praiseworthy, and even necessary, when the words are addressed to one person and the intention is for another person."[43] A good Christian may be indignant at the manifest boldness of this way of doing things that allows the philosopher not only to freely contravene decrees he finds unpleasant but to masquerade as an accredited

defender of the faith. Even so, one ought to ask whether, from the viewpoint of the Christian faith, the attitude of the new political thinkers of the Middle Ages is not in the final analysis less offensive than certain forms of unbelief to which we have grown accustomed in modern times, such as respectful indifference or nostalgia for a lost faith that no longer distinguishes between myth and theological truth. Dante's impiety, if he was impious, could be but a poignant manifestation of what in poetic terms the *Comedy* calls the "everlasting thirst for the godly realm"[44] or the "holy hunger for gold,"[45] which is to say for God, that stirs in the depths of the human heart.

**Notes**

1 See Gershom Scholem, *The Origins of the Kabbalah* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1987), 20–27.

2 See Gershom Scholem, *On the Kabbalah and Its Symbolism* (New York: Schocken Books, 1970), 44–47; and *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (New York: Schocken Books, 1946), 20–22.

3 See Scholem, *Kabbalah and Symbolism,* 63–66.

4 See Scholem, *Major Trends,* 25–27.

5 For a survey of the question and an assessment of the results to date, see F. Van Steenberghen, "Une légende tenace: la théorie de a double vérité," *Académie royale de Belgique, Bulletin Classe des lettres et des sciences morales et politiques,* ser. V, no. 56 (1970): 179–196. See also E. Gilson, "La doctrine de la double vérité," in *Études de philosophie médiévale* (Strasbourg: Commission de publications de la Faculté des lettres, 1921), 51–69; J. P. Muller, "Philosophie et foi chez Siger de Brabant: la théorie de la double vérité," in *Studia Anselmiana* 7–8 (1938): 35–50; B. H. Zelder, "Double Truth, Theory of," in *New Catholic Encyclopedia,* IV (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1967), 1022–1023.

6 "For they say that these things are true according to philosophy but not according to the Catholic faith, as if there were two contrary truths and as if the truth of Sacred Scripture were contradicted by the truth in the sayings of the accursed pagans, of whom it is written, 'I will destroy the wisdom of the wise' (I Cor. 1.19)" (*Condemnation of 219 Propositions,* preface).

7 See F. Van Steenberghen, "Une légende tenace," 193.

8 "Since, therefore, there exists a twofold truth concerning the divine being, one to which the inquiry of the reason can reach, the other which surpasses the whole ability of the human reason, it is fitting that both of these truths be proposed to man divinely for belief" (Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles* I, 4).

9 Augustine, *The City of God* XI, 10, 3. See *On Christian Doctrine* II, 40, 60.

10 See Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine* II, 41, 62.

11 See Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* I, q. 1, art. 8, ad 2; and *On Truth,* q. 14, art. 10, ad 9.

12 See Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles,* I, 7; and *Disputed Questions on Truth,* q. 14, art. 10, ad 7.

13 On the principal exponents of esotericism in Dante (Foscolo, Rossetti, Pascoli, Valli, Ricolfi, et al.), see Aldo Vallone, *La critica dantesca nell' ottocento* (Florence: Leo S. Olschki, 1958), 70ff.; and *La critica dantesca contemporanea* (Pisa: Nistri-Lischi, 1953), 202ff.; and Paul Renucci, "Dantismo esoterica nel secolo presente," *Atti del Congresso Internazionale di studi danteschi* (Florence: Sansoni, 1965), 305–332.

14 See E. Aroux, *Dante, hérétique, révolutionnaire et socialiste* (Paris: J. Renouard, 1854; reprint, Paris: Editions Niclaus, 1939), 73–81.

15 See, among other sources, E. R. Vincent, *Gabriele Rossetti in England* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1936), 72–110; and R. Guénon, *L'ésoterisme de Dante* (Paris: Gallimard, 1957), 11–37.

16 See A. Vallone, *La critica contemporanea,* 207; and E. R. Vincent, *Rossetti,* 77–78.

17 Plato, *Letter* VII, 341b–e; see also *Republic* V, 455b.

18 See Plato, *Phaedrus,* 274b–278b.

19 See Plato, *Phaedrus,* 277b–c.

20 See Plato, *Phaedrus,* 275e; and also *Letter* II, 314a–c.

21 See Plato, *Phaedrus,* 275d; and *Protagoras,* 329a.

22 Clement of Alexandria, *Stromateis* I, 1, 10; see also VI, 7, 61; and VI, 15, 131. For an interpretation of these and a few other similar passages, see E. L. Fortin, "Clement of Alexandria and the Esoteric Tradition," in *Studia Patristica,* IX (Berlin, 1966), 41–56. The first writer to make a substantial argument against the idea of a dual teaching of this kind in Plato appears to be Schleiermacher in the introduction to his translation of the dialogues. According to Schleiermacher, the specifically esoteric teaching was to be found either in the dialogues themselves, which is not the case, or in lessons taught orally or in writings that are not extant, and which will consequently never be known. The Socratic or dialogical method comes down to a purely pedagogical procedure aimed at getting the reader to think. Plato himself would not have intended to present two different teachings. The distinction between an esoteric and an exoteric teaching has instead to do with the mind of the reader, who does not always rise to the level of the teacher or to thinking philosophically on his own.

23 See Plato, *Phaedrus,* 277e.

24 See al-Farabi, *Plato and Aristotle* II, 7, 30.

25 See al-Farabi, *Plato and Aristotle* II, 8, 31.

26 See al-Farabi, *Plato and Aristotle* II, 9, 35.

27 On "repetition" as a pedagogical technique aimed at both revealing and concealing the truth, see L. Strauss, "Farabi's Plato," in *Louis Ginzberg Jubilee Volume* (New York: American Academy of Jewish Research, 1945), 382.

28 See al-Farabi, *Plato and Aristotle* X, 10, 36. See Plato, *Republic* V, 450a, in which Thrasymachus, reduced to silence since book I, gives his assent to a plan that has just been drawn up. He too must take part in the new city in speech. His reconciliation with Socrates is mentioned in VI, 498c–d. On the meaning of these passages, see Leo Strauss, *The City and Man* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964), 123–124, 133–134; and Allan Bloom, *The Republic,* 379, 400.

29 See al-Farabi, *Plato and Aristotle* II, 10, 38; and I, 4, 60, in which it is said that whoever engages in philosophy "should have sound conviction about the opinions of the religion in which he is reared, hold fast to the virtuous acts in his religion, and not forsake all or most of them." In a similar vein, see Plutarch, *Life of Nicias* 23, 5: "It was only afterwards that the reputation of Plato, shining forth by his life, and because he subjected natural necessity to divine and more excellent principles, took away from the obloquy and scandal that had attached to such contemplations, and obtained these studies currency among all people" (trans. John Dryden).

30 Thomas Aquinas, *In De divinibus nominibus,* Proemium, II.

31 See Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* III, q. 42, art. 3; *In Boethium de Trinitate,* Proemium, q. 2, art. 4. See also how Thomas understands Aristotle's description of the Platonic dialogue in *Politics* II, 3, 1265a11–13, in which he states that the speeches of Socrates have something out of the ordinary (*peritton*), are filled with finesse (*kompson*) and originality (*kainotomon*), and abound in penetrating inquiries (*zetetikon*). Since he had no direct acquaintance with the works of Plato, Thomas interprets Aristotle's text to mean that the speeches of Socrates are replete with digressions, frivolities, paradoxes, and difficulties of all sorts. See *In Libros Politicorum Aristotelis Expositio* II, 6.

32 See Dante, *Paradiso* 20, 67–72, 118–126.

33 See Dante, *Paradiso* 20, 43–48, 106–117; and also *Purgatorio* 10, 73–93.

34 See P. Renucci, "Gaston Paris et la légende de Trajan dans la Divine Comédie," *Bulletin de la Faculté des*

*Lettres de Strasbourg* 26 (1947): 1–10.

35 “Nowhere before Dante do we find any suggestion that this Trojan prince attained Heaven, or that he was of particular importance” (C. Singleton, *The Divine Comedy, Paradiso 2: Commentary,* 336). Singleton states elsewhere that whether an individual was or was not in paradise did not depend on Dante. See *Dante Studies* I, 81.

36 See Virgil, *Aeneid* II, 426–427.

37 See Virgil, *Aeneid* II, 386–397. Ripheus and his companions discovered this stratagem by accident, for it was only under cover of night that they were taken as Greeks. The idea then came to them to willingly adopt a course of action they may not have thought of otherwise.

38 See Dante, *Monarchy* III, 14.

39 See F. Van Steenberghen, “Une légende tenace,” 192.

40 See Dante, *Convivio* III, 10, 7.

41 See Dante, *Purgatorio* 20, 85–90.

42 See Dante, *Monarchy* III, 15, 18. For the concepts of “discretion” and “reverence,” as well as the distinction among reverence, irreverence, and nonreverence, see *Convivio* IV, 8, 1–16.

43 Dante, *Convivio* III, 10, 6; see also I, 1, 18; and II, 12, 8–10.

44 Dante, *Paradiso* 2, 19–20.

45 Dante, *Purgatorio* 22, 40–41.

# CHAPTER EIGHT

## *The Decline of Political Philosophy*

If the idea of philosophy becoming once again political in its mode occupies such a considerable place in medieval thought, how is it that it was neglected for so long and that we have such a hard time recognizing or accepting it? Two major currents of modern thought seem to have played a decisive role in this matter: the philosophy of the Enlightenment and the development of historical thinking during the nineteenth century.

It is easy to understand why the eighteenth-century philosophers had little interest in the political and religious quarrels of an age in which they saw only superstition and barbarism. The advent of the Enlightenment, it was thought, had gradually dissipated the darkness in which humanity had heretofore been stuck. There had been in that period a few enlightened minds, tragic victims of ignorance and religious fanaticism, whose fate could arouse feelings, but these incidents were not part of an unalterable situation.[1] They were not the doing of society as such, but of the obscurantist beliefs that ravaged past societies. A reconciliation had since taken place between philosophy and civil society that made any conflict of the kind that intellectuals of the past could lament henceforth unthinkable. Since knowledge in any form was in itself beneficial, it was to be welcomed with open arms and its diffusion encouraged by whatever means possible. The result would be the greater good, not only of thinkers but of all of society and humanity.

Ernest Renan was still defending this thesis with exceptional ardor in a famous book titled *Averroès et l'averroïsme,* published in 1852. As a loyal disciple of the Enlightenment Renan was persuaded that in the Middle Ages an unbridgeable gap separated the elite from the masses, philosophy from religion, and science from society. The Arab philosophers had the honor of reviving Greek science in a milieu that was particularly resistant to it. It is no wonder that they met with such opposition from their contemporaries.[2] Lost in societies in which the grossest prejudices reigned, they had to fend for themselves as best they could.[3] We do not know how they personally resolved the problem of the discrepancy between their knowledge and their religious beliefs and we do not need to be overly concerned about it. That was, after all, their own business.[4] The question does not even arise for us who live at a time when "critical science" has finally brought an end to superstition, and barbarism has yielded to "civilized humanity." Consequently, nothing compels us to take seriously what they would have to say on the subject.[5] Renan's otherwise remarkable book overlooks completely the use Averroes made of Plato and the Platonic method.[6] It is not that Renan simply chose not to deal with this problem; he did not even see that it could exist.[7] It was to be the same with nearly all those who, following him, were to deal with questions of this sort from the viewpoint of Islamic philosophy as well as Christian scholasticism.

However, the science in which Renan placed such confidence was to undergo a profound transformation of its own. In the meantime, a new school of thought had arisen, which, in invoking the meaning of history, was to bring back the problem of the relations among science, society, and religion to the center of our preoccupations. This school, commonly known by the term historicism, begins with the principle that human thought in what is most proper to it is rooted in "absolute presuppositions" that vary from one period to another and which it never succeeds in overcoming.[8] It follows from this that all of the cultural and other manifestations of a given period are integrated into a larger whole whose parts are joined at the deepest level and animated by one and the same spirit. This obtains not only for philosophy, science, and the arts, but equally for politics and religion, which are also bound up into a fixed historical context and can be understood only with reference to that context. Contrary to what the Enlightenment philosophers had thought, there can be no radical opposition between the thought of an author and that of his time period. Since they are both part of the same *Weltanschauung,* their harmony is ensured from that start. Just as the philosophy of al-Farabi and Averroes was essentially Islamic, so the philosophy of Dante and his contemporaries was essentially Christian.

The quarrels that from to time have pitted thinkers against their social milieu were merely matters of simple misunderstanding. They are necessarily located at a superficial level and in no way disrupt the basic unity of the particular period in question. For even when he sets himself up as a critic of society and its principles, a thinker is constrained to appeal to arguments that are susceptible of being understood by his audience and whose intelligibility derives in the final analysis from the overall situation to which both he and his adversaries belong.

If, as Troeltsch and the history of religious school would have it, the understanding of an author inevitably passes through the large collective unities that are the people, culture, or civilization or, to put it another way, if the most useful information on this matter comes to us not from the author himself but from his historical milieu, then the properly "political" aspect of his thought will be of only secondary interest to us. Since we will be persuaded that he lived in invincible ignorance of the historical conditioning of all human thought, we will be less preoccupied to discover what he could teach us than to know what we ourselves could teach him. We will in fact claim to understand him better than he understood himself, even before we knew just how he understood himself. There is little likelihood that under such conditions we would be inclined to accord to what he himself had to say the full importance he attached to it.

Political philosophy reappeared in our time the moment we became aware that this so-called "historical consciousness" could be but the reflection of or, better yet, the logical culmination of what the greatest thinkers of our time have called the crisis of Western thought. If history is everywhere necessary today, it is above all because it constitutes the only means we have to regain contact with ideas that, though they have been long forgotten, are nonetheless indispensable for an adequate analysis of the great problems of our time.

No one will be bold enough to pretend that we have in hand the answer to the serious challenges raised by the acute problem of the connections between philosophical thinking and political power or that we have at our disposal the categories that would allow us to take it up again in all of its breadth. The very diversity of the positions our contemporaries have taken on the matter reveal the extent to which the obviousness of the problem surpasses the solutions that are proposed. As long as this state of affairs lasts, the thinkers of classical antiquity and the Middle Ages will hold a particular attraction for us. It may be that in their works are hidden secrets the knowledge of which could shed new light on our present situation and perhaps guide us to the rediscovery of what, under the thrall of historical thinking, we no longer dare call our permanent human nature or condition.

## Notes

1 See the characteristic remarks of John Stuart Mill in chapter *2 of On Liberty*. By Mill's account the condemnation of Socrates for impiety and immorality was due to the blindness and stupidity of his accusers. Mill acknowledges that freedom of speech at times does injury to the unity required for life in society. However, he does not hesitate to extend freedom as much as possible, based on the idea of progress, which excludes any return to barbarism and automatically ensures the future of civilization. See also Mill, *A System of Logic,* II (London, 1872), 521–522:

> The second condition of permanent political society has been found to be the existence in some form or other, of the feeling of allegiance or loyalty. This feeling may vary in its objects, and is not confined to any particular form of government. . . . But in all political societies which have had a durable existence, there has been some fixed point: something which people agreed in holding sacred; which, wherever freedom of discussion was a recognized principle, it was of course lawful to contest in theory, but which no one could either fear or hope to see shaken in practice; which, in short (except perhaps during some temporary crisis) was in the common estimation placed beyond discussion. . . . But when the questioning of these fundamental principles is (not the occasional disease, or salutary medicine, but) the habitual condition of the body politic, and when all the violent animosities are called forth, which spring naturally from such a situation, the state is virtually in a position of civil war; and can never long remain free from it in acts and fact.

See also 151: "It is my belief indeed that the general tendency is, and will continue to be, saving occasional and temporary exceptions, one of improvement, a tendency toward the better and happier state." Hegel took the "collision" between Socrates and Athens that Mill speaks of in a different way. For

Hegel, the death of Socrates was neither accidental nor superfluous but necessary and tragic. The antagonism of the Athenians was fully justified, given that the Greek city could not survive the new power manifested in his person. This takes nothing away from the fact that the conflict was to be overcome thanks to the historical process that brings about the perfectly rational state by reconciling the two principles whose confrontation was then inevitable. See Hegel, *Philosophy of History,* 270. In the preface to *Philosophy of Right,* Hegel explains that the problem of the tension between philosophy and civil society is resolved in the modern state, in which philosophical knowledge becomes concretely accessible to every citizen. Accordingly, "philosophy with us is not, as it was with the Greeks for instance, pursued in private like an art, but has an existence in the open, in contact with the public, and especially, or even only, in the service of the state" (Hegel *Philosophy of Right,* trans. T. M. Knox [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967], 7).

2

> Ces persecutions, du reste, ne furent point un événement isolé. Vers la fin du XIIe siècle, la guerre contre la philosophie est organisée sur toute la surface du monde musulman. . . . Ce qu'il importe de remarquer, et ce qui peut paraître surprenant au premier coup d'oeil, c'est que ces persecutions étaient fort agréables au peuple, et que les princes les plus lettrés se les laissaient arracher, malgré leurs gouts personnels, comme un moyen de popularité. (Ernest Renan, *Averroès et l'arverroïsme,* 42 and 46)

3

> Certes, rien ne s'oppose à ce que des esprits aussi exercés que les philosophes arabes . . . aient partagé la foi religieuse de leur compatriotes. En effet, la religion dominante se crée d'ordinaire un privilège contre la critique. Peut-on révoquer en doute la parfaite bonne foi de tant de grands esprits des siècles passes, lesquels ont admis sans sourciller certaines croyances qui, de nos jours, troublent la conscience d'un enfant? Il n'y a pas de dogme si absurde qui n'ait été admis par des hommes doués en toute autre chose d'une grande finesse d'espirt. Rien n'empêche donc de supposer qu'Ibn-Roschd a cru à l'islamisme, surtout si l'on considère combien le surnaturel est peu prodigue dans les dogmes essentiels de cette religion, et combien elle se rapproche de déisme le plus épuré. (Renan, *Averroès,* 134)

4

> On voit qu'il ne faut pas demander une extreme rigueur à la doctrine d'Ibn-Roschd sur les rapports de la philosophie et du prophétisme: nous garderons de lui en faire un reproche. L'inconséquence est un element essential de toutes les choses humaines. La logique mène aux abîmes. Qui peut sonder l'indiscernable mystère de sa propre conscience, et, dans le grand chaos de la vie humaine, quelle raison sait au juste où s'arrêtent ses chances de bien voir et son droit d'affirmer?... Peut-être aussi Gazzali n'avait-il pas absolument tort, et les philosophes méritaient-ils le reproche d'inconséquence ou de restriction mentale. Dieu le sait. (Renan, *Averroès,* 140 and 142)

5

> Je suis le premier à reconnaître que nous n'avons rien ou presque rien à apprendre ni d'Averroès, ni des Arabes, ni du moyen age. Bien que les problèmes qui préoccupent aujourd'hui l'esprit humain soient au fond identiques à ceux qui l'ont toujours solicité, la forme sous laquelle ces problèmes se posent de nos jours est si particulière à notre

> siècle que très peu des ancien-nces solutions sont encore susceptibles d'y être appliquées. Il ne faut demander au passé que le passé lui-même. (Renan, *Averroès,* 15)

6 See Renan, *Averroès,* 54–59, in which Plato is not even mentioned among the authors Averroes drew upon. The most Renan does is to note Averroes's commentary on the *Republic* in passing on page 69.

7 "La politique d'Ibn-Roschd, on s'y attend bien, n'a pas grande orginalité. Elle est toute entière dans sa *Paraphrase de la Republique de Platon.* Rien de plus bizarre que de voir prise au serieux et analysée comme un traité technique cette curieuse fantaisie de l'esprit grec" (Renan, *Averroès,* 133).

8

> It became clear to me that metaphysics... is no futile attempt at knowing what lies beyond the limits of experience, but is primarily at any given time an attempt to discover what the people at that time believe about the world's general nature; such beliefs being the presuppositions of all their "physics," that is, their inquiries into its detail. Secondarily, it is the attempt to discover the corresponding presuppositions of other peoples and other times, and to follow the historical process by which one set of presuppositions has turned into another. . . . The beliefs which a metaphysician tries to study and codify are presuppositions of the questions asked by natural scientists, but are not answers to any questions at all. This might be expressed by calling them "absolute" presuppositions. (R. G. Collingwood, *An Autobiography* [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1939], 65).

See also Collingwood, *An Essay on Metaphysics* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1940), 21–48. On the difference between the attitudes of the Enlightenment and of the new "historical" thinking regarding prejudices as either obstacles to knowing or conditions for knowing, see H. G. Gadamer, *Truth and Method,* 153–191.

# APPENDIX

## *Dante's Comedy As Utopia*

It is not at all common to think of the *Divine Comedy* or any part thereof as a utopia, and, in fact, Dante's name rarely shows up in any of the studies that have been made of this important literary genre. J. O. Hertzler was speaking not only for himself but for the bulk of twentieth-century scholarship when he wrote over a half a century ago: "Following the appearance of Augustine's *City of God* there was a period of nearly a thousand years during which there was no instance of even the most meager and insignificant utopian literature." [1]

The reason for the omission is not far to seek. Overwhelmed by the magic of Dante's poetry, we tend to equate the *Paradiso* with the heaven of Christian theology. But the heaven of Christian theology cannot properly be defined as a utopia, that is to say, a perfect society that exists only in the imagination of some poet or political thinker. It is coeval with creation and hence always actual. Any suggestion to the contrary would border on impiety.

### The Dantean Inversion

The trouble with this view of the *Paradiso* is that it misunderstands the use that is made of the allegorical method in the poem, a use characterized by what I shall call the "Dantean inversion." Whereas in medieval theology the material world is seen as an image or reflection of God's manifold *perfection—invisibilia Dei per ea quae facta sunt conspiciuntur* (Romans 1:20)—in the *Comedy* the opposite is the case: the world to come functions as an image of our world. To quote Dante's *Letter to Can Grande della Scala* (written as an introduction to the *Paradiso* and therewith the *Comedy* as a whole), the poet's overall aim is to "remove those living in *this* life from a state of misery and lead them to a state of happiness."[2] Accordingly, his poem has two meanings, one literal and the other figurative or spiritual. Taken literally, its subject is "the state of souls after death." Taken figuratively—and we may assume that the figurative sense is the higher of the two—its subject is the human being "earning or becoming liable to the rewards or punishments of justice through the exercise of his free will."[3]

It matters little for present purposes that the Dantean authenticity of this letter has been contested and continues to be contested by modern scholars,[4] for one easily comes to the same conclusion by reading the *Comedy,* the whole of which is permeated by a thoroughly intramundane or this-worldly spirit. This is true even of the *Paradiso,* which, as I shall argue, is not a description of heaven but a picture of what, in Dante's opinion, the perfect Christian society on earth might look like if it were to come into being. Paradoxically, the poem that has done more than any other work to fix in our imaginations the contours of the next world is concerned exclusively with the modalities and vicissitudes of life here below. The assumption on which it rests is that the perfect society in question has never existed in reality and probably never will. The poet's sole intention is to offer a model by which human beings may be guided in their efforts at political reform while at the same time making them aware of the limits of human justice and hence of the need for moderation in its pursuit.

Needless to say, Dante himself does not employ the term "utopia," which would not be coined for another two centuries (by Thomas More in 1516), but the notion that it conveys was as familiar to him as it was to the great political thinkers who had preceded him. This much becomes evident when we reflect on the etymology of the word, which is formed on the basis of the Greek expressions *ou topos,* meaning "no place," and *eu topos,* meaning a "good place," the implication being that the good or perfect society is not to be found anywhere in the world as we know it. Plato spoke in this connection of a "city in speech,"[5] in contrast to actual cities, all of which were judged to be more or less defective or corrupt. Dante's language is different. The poet adverts instead to the four senses according to which his poem is to be interpreted: the literal or historical, the allegorical, the moral, and the anagogical.

The literal sense, which is presupposed to the others and with which any interpretation of the poem must

begin, is, as its name indicates, the one imparted by the letter of the text; to this literal sense may then be added one or more of the three. The point is illustrated by means of a single example borrowed from Exodus 14, the crossing of the Red Sea. Taken in its literal sense, Exodus 14 is an account of the rescue of the Israelites from Egypt at the time of Moses, but Christians believe that this historical event was also intended by the Holy Spirit as a prefiguration or "type" of baptism, through whose waters the soul is rescued spiritually and ushered into the life of grace. Such is its allegorical meaning. In its moral sense, it may be seen as a figure of humanity's deliverance from its enslavement to sin. Finally, the same event can be viewed as an anticipatory image of the events reserved for the end-time, at which moment the saved among us will pass from the sorrows of this life to the joys of eternal life. This is what in the Christian tradition was known as the *sensus anagogicus* or "anagogical sense" of the text.

Thus understood, Dante's doctrine has nothing original about it. It has its roots in Pauline typology and had been the most commonly used method of biblical interpretation since the age of the Fathers.[6] What is new is that for the first time someone has chosen to apply it to a text other than the Bible, but not without a number of subtle modifications of which the reader is not immediately aware. The best way to approach the problem is to ask ourselves how, concretely, the method is supposed to work in the poem.

For the most part, students of the *Comedy,* beginning with Dante's early commentators, have been remarkably adept at uncovering all sorts of allegorical and moral meanings in it. If anything, the harvest, in this regard, is apt to be too plentiful. There is virtually no end to the ingenious interpretations that have been proposed of the characters, objects, or incidents that fill the pages of the poem; so much so that it is occasionally necessary to warn the allegorizers that the slope is more slippery than they think. Take, for instance, the case of Beatrice, Dante's guide in *Paradiso,* who has been made to stand for any number of strange and often incompatible realities: baptism, the minor orders, the monastic tonsure, the priestly vocation, the ideal woman, the bishop of Florence, the agent intellect, reason illumined by faith, the light of glory, the essence of Christian theology, and the list goes on and on. Believe me, it would be a mistake to think that the allegorical and moral senses of the *Comedy* are wholly unproblematic.

My own concern is not with these two senses but with the anagogical sense, which has always proved more elusive, and on which there is little agreement among critics. Where exactly are we to look for it in the poem? One's instinct is to equate it with the so-called "beatific vision" that awaits Dante at the end of his journey through life, but this explanation is not altogether convincing, first of all because it refers to an event that, at this point, has no reality outside of the poet's imagination, and secondly, because it runs counter to Dante's repeated assertion that the poem deals with *this* life and not the afterlife.

There is a more plausible explanation, which is that Dante's subdivision of the spiritual sense into allegorical, moral, and anagogical has as its purpose to call attention to the specific character of each of the three main divisions of the poem: hell, purgatory, and heaven. It can be shown, I think, that the subject matter of the *Inferno* is treated for the most part according to the allegorical mode; that in the *Purgatorio,* where Dante's ethics is laid out, the moral sense predominates; and that the *Paradiso* reveals its true meaning only when read in terms of what Dante understands by the anagogical sense. These are not necessarily hard and fast lines, and a certain amount of crisscrossing takes place throughout the poem, but not to the extent of depriving the three labels of any determinate meaning. No one can reasonably look for, say, an anagogical sense in the *Inferno* as a whole or for an allegorical sense in the *Paradiso* as a whole.

My thesis in a nutshell is that what Dante means by the anagogical sense is what we mean today when we speak of a utopia. The poet, after all, did not know any more than we do about the heaven promised to us at the end of our days, but as a political thinker he had a good idea of what constitutes a well-ordered society. His *Paradiso* is, in effect, a blueprint of what, under the circumstances of his time, a society of this kind would look like if it were to be realized. Such an assertion is bolder than may seem at first hearing; it comes down to saying that politics rather than religion is the core of Dante's enterprise and that the *Comedy* makes complete sense only when read in that light. This is not to imply that the poem is devoid of any religious significance, but only that the religious significance, whatever it may finally be, is firmly imbedded in a political context from which it cannot be divorced. Dante may or may not have wanted to prepare us for the joys of heaven, but one thing is certain: he was passionately interested in restoring a measure of unity and strength to a Christian world that suddenly found itself threatened by powerful enemies without and increasingly sharp divisions within.

## The Structural Weakness of the Holy Roman Empire

The task at hand, a difficult one at all times, was rendered doubly difficult by the unique character of medieval society, the most distinctive features of which owed their origin to a series of complicated

historical accidents resulting in the establishment of a new empire in the West under Charlemagne in the year 800—a momentous event precipitated by the conflict between the papacy and the Byzantine emperor, Leo III, the Isaurian, over the religious use of images. The matter bears some investigation inasmuch as its main lines tend to disappear beneath the plethora of minute details unearthed by modern historians.[7]

The heart and soul of the Byzantine Empire had been for centuries and remained its so-called *romanitas* or "Romanness." Its capital, Constantinople, the world's first Christian city (it had no pagan temples), looked upon itself as the "new Rome," and its political head, who bore the title of "Ruler of the Romans"—*Basileus tôn Romaiôn*—had never relinquished his legal title to the Western part of the Empire. To counteract his universal authority a more powerful figure was needed, for whom the Latin name of *imperator* or "emperor" was made to order, and the more so as it had no exact equivalent in the Greek language.[8]

The sad fact of the matter, however, is that from its inception the artificially created superstructure had few chances of ever becoming more than a pale replica of the ancient Roman Empire. As an intellectual offspring of the papacy, the new emperor was literally a ruler without a throne and had no real status beyond that of an ancillary organ. Throughout most of his existence, he remained a tragic figure, floating in a kind of vacuum and impeded in the exercise of his duties by the simultaneous presence of a higher authority. Unlike his rival, the Byzantine *autocrator,* he was not the image of God on earth but was expected to display the virtues of devotion and humility that befit a ruler who has delivered himself into the hands of churchmen, a member, like everyone else, of the people of God and subject to the jurisdiction of its official representatives.

Prior to his anointment, which was administered at the discretion of the pope, he was only the emperor-elect. No throne was present at his coronation. Instead, he was given a sword, symbolizing his role as the pope's universal, if at times recalcitrant, policeman. Whereas the priestly "character" was indelible, his could be removed at any moment, and sometimes was. What would have been unthinkable in the East had suddenly become the rule in the West. By a strange confluence of unforeseeable circumstances, the ecclesiastical power had deftly managed to sandwich itself between the divinity and the temporal power. Papal theocracy had emerged as an alternative to Caesaropapism, with the successor of Peter arrogating to himself temporal functions for which he had no divine mandate (the extravagant claims were mostly based on forgeries, such as the *Donation of Constantine* and the ninth-century collection of papal or synodal decrees known as the *PseudoIsidore* ) and which he was not necessarily competent to discharge. In short, a new foundation was needed if effective political rule was to be reestablished in the Western lands.

The consequences of this less than desirable state of affairs are vividly depicted throughout the *Comedy,* beginning with the first scene of the poem, which shows Dante lost in a dark wood and trying to climb to the summit of a mountain whose shoulders are bathed in sunlight. His efforts are thwarted by the sudden appearance of a leopard, a lion, and a she-wolf, the last being by far the most fearsome of the three beasts, for it is the one that "kills." The leopard with the spotted hide recalls Dante's native Florence and its warring factions, the Whites and the Blacks, constantly vying not with but against each other for control of the city. The lion, the traditional symbol of royalty, represents the king of France, and the she-wolf, Rome or the papacy, the two foreign powers then most directly involved in Florentine politics. It is significant that the text links them together as partners, so to speak, in a succession of intrigues that led to the triumph of the Blacks over the Whites as well as to the poet's indictment and subsequent condemnation. At the sight of the she-wolf, Dante, who had once found cause for good hope in the beast with the gaily painted hide, loses heart and is ready to admit defeat. He is then rescued by Virgil, who announces that, in order to escape from that evil place, he will have to take another road. The new and longer road is of course the one that leads through hell, purgatory, and the heavenly spheres all the way up to the empyrean.

What follows in the *Inferno* and the whole first half of the *Purgatorio* is for the most part a thinly disguised account of the major events of Dante's life and a graphic description of the relentless strife that had been tearing Florence, the rest of Italy, and the whole of Christendom apart for over a century. If, as I have suggested and hope to demonstrate, the *Paradiso* is Dante's utopia, the *Inferno* has all the attributes of a "dystopia." The picture that it presents is the very antithesis of what a rational society is expected to be. The majority of its inhabitants, having lost the "good of the intellect" (*Inf.* 3, 18), are actuated by the basest and most selfish of passions. Violence and fraud dominate the scene, and, abetted by the thirst for gain, grow stronger by the hour. The consequences both for individuals and for society at large are disastrous.

Among the victims is Dante himself, whose personal odyssey is told between the lines of the successive cantos. It has not been sufficiently observed that the order of these cantos, which often seems arbitrary, is dictated less by the nature of the sins portrayed in the various circles of hell than by the chronology of the poet's life. To cite only three examples chosen more or less at random: in canto 13, Pier delle Vigne, the

poet who had served as Frederick II's secretary and was falsely accused of embezzlement, is Dante, who had likewise served as secretary of the Florentine republic and was charged with a similar crime. The hapless but by no means helpless Ulysses of canto 26, who cannot or will not return to Ithaca, is again Dante, the exile who was prevented from returning to Florence by the sentence of death that was twice pronounced against him. In canto 27, Guido da Montefeltro, the retired captain of the Ghibeline League, whom Boniface VIII had absolved in advance for his collusion in a treacherous deed plotted by the pope himself, is none other than Dante, whom the Florentine leaders, now desperate for help, tried to entice back with an offer of amnesty or pardon *in absentia.*[9]

The whole matter comes to a head in canto 16 of *Purgatorio,* the fifti eth canto of the *Comedy* and the one in which the entire first half of the poem culminates. The gist of that famous canto is that human beings have themselves and not their stars to blame for the evils from which they suffer. The seeds of virtue have been implanted in them from birth, but they will not bear fruit unless they are properly nurtured (v. 66–82). If so few virtuous people remain, it is less because of the corruption of human nature than because of the absence of good government. Just as the source of the present wickedness is not original sin but bad leadership, so the cure is not divine grace but a return to sound political rule. The laws exist and they are good. Alas, no one is around to enforce them and repress evildoers (v. 85–105; cf. 6, 76–78). The last of the emperors was Frederick II, who died, deposed and excommunicated, in 1250. His successors, never having been anointed or granted full recognition, were emperors in name only. For a period known as the *interregnum,* which lasted close to twenty-five years (1250–1273), there was no emperor at all, not even an emperor-elect.

The problem has deeper ramifications, however, for the failure of princes to carry out their responsibilities is traceable to the constant impingements of the ecclesiastical authority. It used to be that the world was ruled by two suns, the pope and the emperor. By combining within itself both sovereignties, the former has usurped the place of the latter and soiled itself with the burden. Of the vices that plague human existence, there is none more prevalent than greed and none to which the Church, by reason of its lack of material self-sufficiency, is more prone. Rome's habit of forging political alliances for the sake of its own aggrandizement not only sets a bad example for its followers but effectively neutralizes the efforts of the one agency by which its worldly ambitions might be contained (v. 116–29). Little wonder that courtesy and valor have ceased from the land and that the world, deserted by every virtue, should go astray (v. 58–60; 82).

In fairness, it should be added that the papacy is not the only culprit in the matter. Dante makes it clear that the emperors, who were often more interested in securing and expanding their own domains than in carrying out their public duties, bore their share of the blame for the present woes. Canto 7 of *Purgatorio* shows them gathered in a peaceful valley where they spend their lives in idleness, unable but perhaps also unwilling to exercise their proper authority, or so it would seem from the reproaches that Dante heaps upon them.

## The Monarchic Ideal

Such, in barest outline, is Dante's diagnosis of the fundamental illness of his time. What is the remedy? To be sure, one can always preach a return to the old-fashioned virtues of courage and self-restraint, and the *Comedy* is not short on exhortations of this kind. But efforts at persuasion are rarely successful without the support of some authority capable of enforcing standards of public morality. When it comes to that, Dante's *Monarchia* has more to offer at first glance. Its specific proposal, which is also the point on which it is thought by many to deviate conspicuously from the *Comedy,* is the establishment of a world government that would maintain peace among the various elements of Christendom and foster a way of life in which justice and freedom can thrive. Why Dante would have abandoned this proposal, if he did abandon it, is not at all evident since the situation envisaged in the *Comedy* does not appear to be any different from the one with which he tries to cope in the *Monarchia.* One gathers as much from the rather irreverent manner in which the *Comedy* still speaks of the papacy, as it does, for example, in the Geryon episode (*Inf*. 17), on which we commented earlier (pp. 89–92).

It is worth noting that this comical interlude is again autobiographical in nature. The scene that it evokes took place in 1301, when Dante and two other Florentine dignitaries were sent to Rome on a mission the purpose of which was to work out a solution to the conflict that had arisen between the two rival factions, the Whites, who sided with the emperor, and the Blacks, who were partial to the pope. The ambassadors were duly received by Boniface but the meeting achieved no tangible results. Two of the emissaries were allowed to go back to Florence, but not Dante, from whom, as a contemporary chronicler notes, the pope had more to fear. In the interval, he was accused of embezzlement by his fellow Florentines and summoned

before the tribunal. When he refused to appear, he was sentenced to death and went into perpetual exile.

The Geryon episode may be the most humorous episode of its kind in the *Comedy,* but it is not the only one. The poem, as anyone who has read it knows, teems with all kinds of gibes at the papacy, each one funnier or more virulent than the others. All of the medieval popes named in it have been consigned to hell in the company of simonists or heretics, with one exception: John XXI, the scholastic philosopher Peter of Spain, who reigned for a total of nine months.[10]

If, as we are given to understand, the papacy is as powerful and given to political intrigue as ever, by what means is it to be restrained? A closer look at the *Paradiso* reveals that the solution to which the *Comedy* points, although couched in more pious terms, is remarkably similar to the one advanced in the *Monarchia.* One of the key passages in this regard is canto 18, where, having reached the heaven of Jupiter, the emblem of justice, Dante and Beatrice witness a dazzling astronomical spectacle that is nothing less than the apotheosis of world-monarchic rule. More than a thousand brilliant lights come together to spell the first verse of the Book of Wisdom, "Love righteousness, you rulers of the earth": *Diligite iustitiam, qui iudicatis terram.* Soon other lights assemble on top of the "m" of *terram* in such a way as to assume the form, first of the Florentine lily, and then of the imperial eagle. This brilliant display is followed by what purports to be a discussion of the theological problem of predestination, which was debated at considerable length in cantos 19 and 20. Which predestination? Not the one that a Christian theologian spontaneously thinks of, but the one whereby the various nations of the world are now destined to become incorporated into an all-encompassing political organization ruled by a single head.

In retrospect, one discovers that the whole first part of the *Paradiso* is nothing but the unfolding of a vast scheme by means of which all the segments of a Christendom that was being rent asunder by powerful centrifugal forces might be pulled together and made to cooperate in the pursuit of a common goal. Cantos 3 and 4 speak to us about a group of nuns who supposedly left their convents to be married and now have to compensate for their broken vows. This ingenious fabrication is Dante's roundabout way of suggesting how the rebellious kingdoms of southern Italy (represented by the Empress Constance, the mother of Frederick II) and the Blacks of Florence (represented by Piccarda Donati) might make amends for their rebellion and return to the imperial fold. Cantos 6 to 10 invite us to think in terms of a possible reconciliation between Guelphs and Ghibellines (mentioned by name for the only time in 6, 103–108), between Eastern and Western Christendom, as well as between the emperor and the newly emancipated kingdoms of northern and central Europe.

The same strategy is adopted in regard to the deepening rifts that had begun to manifest themselves in intellectual circles. Canto 10, in which the theological luminaries of the Middle Ages are gathered, is particularly striking insofar as it places side by side people who were bitter enemies in life but now speak as if they had always been the closest of friends. Thomas Aquinas, scholasticism's most distinguished theologian, pays tribute to the "eternal light" of his erstwhile rival, Siger of Brabant, the leader of a dissident school of thought known since the nineteenth century as Latin Averroism (v. 133–38). In another delicately ironic passage, St. Bonaventure, who had once mercilessly attacked Joachim of Flora as a false prophet, points to him as one "endowed with the spirit of prophecy" (12, 141).

From the theologians the *Comedy* turns next to the monastic orders, the Dominicans and the Franciscans in particular, and to the endless controversies that had marked their relationship, as well as the divisions that had opened up within their own ranks. The trick this time consists in having Thomas Aquinas, a Dominican, extol the virtues of St. Francis, the founder of the Franciscan Order, and Bonaventure, the Master General of the Franciscans, sing the praises of St. Dominic, the founder of the Dominican Order. Anybody who knows anything about the history of monastic orders does not have to be told that this vision of unity is again highly utopian—something to be prayed for but never fully achieved in practice.

Later on, in canto 30, Beatrice and her disciple reach the empyrean or the heaven of pure light. Their eyes gaze for the first time on all the seats that the "great city" comprises, seats already so full that only a few more people are wanted (v. 130–32). In the midst of them is a throne surmounted by a crown, which unexpectedly turns out to be the throne reserved for "the imperial soul of the lofty Henry," the ruler on whom Dante had once pinned his hopes for the renewal of the empire (v. 133–38).

Scholars have often been taken aback by what some of them judge to be the inappropriateness of this startling symbol of mundane sovereignty in the highest heaven. Singleton's observation that since, for Dante, the imperial power is divinely ordained, it could fittingly be represented even here,[11] does little to alleviate the shock, inasmuch as one would then have to look for a corresponding symbol of papal authority, which is likewise ordained by God. What we find instead is the exact opposite; for at that

moment, Beatrice delivers her parting speech, the burden of which is not only to extol the emperor but to excoriate the treachery of his adversary, Clement V, the pope who stealthily betrayed him.[12] The presence of Henry's throne in the empyrean may be deemed incongruous in the extreme degree, but only if one inclines to the view that the *Comedy* was intended as a revision of Dante's imperial ideal. It is anything but incongruous when read within the context of the author's vision of a refurbished and enlarged Roman Empire presided over by its legitimate and divinely appointed ruler, precisely in accordance with the teaching of the *Monarchia.*

If my interpretation of these passages and others like them is correct, one must conclude that the teaching of the *Comedy* is not fundamentally different from that of the *Monarchia.* This should not come as any great surprise to us, especially if we remember that the two works were written within the last decade of Dante's life and may even have been completed at approximately the same time, that is, within three years of his death. Contrary to popular opinion, I see no reason to think that Dante changed his mind on this subject and every reason to think that the *Monarchia* should be read as a commentary on the *Comedy,* however much it may differ from it in form or tone. What the former says explicitly the latter states only slightly less forthrightly and less didactically.

## The Nature of Dantean Imperialism

This brings us to the massive difficulty with which any student of Dante's political thought must sooner or later come to grips: how can Dante, who hails Aristotle as the "master of those who know"[13] and claims to be his faithful disciple, part company with him on a matter of such extreme importance? It suffices to read the *Politics* once to realize that for Aristotle the society that is most conducive to human perfection is neither a world empire nor a large nation, but the city and a relatively small city at that. Human beings are by nature "political," that is to say, born to live as members, not of an empire, but of a polis, the only association within which their potential can be fully actualized. It, and only it, corresponds to our capacity to know and love, and thus makes possible their total participation in the life of the community. Nothing could be further from Aristotle's thought than the notion of a government that would hold sway not only over the whole of Christendom, but over all the nations of the earth. Experience teaches that large-scale imperialism is usually synonymous with brutal repression and tyranny. People accustomed to their own laws, customs, traditions, and particular ways of life do not willingly give them up for the sake of something alien and often profoundly abhorrent to them. All things considered, it is almost inconceivable that so ardent a lover of freedom as Dante should have endorsed and looked forward to the growth of the one political organism that is most inimical to its exercise. What induced him to do so?

Two major factors lay behind this otherwise inexplicable decision. The first was the necessity to provide for the defense of the Christian West in the face of the persistent threat posed by Islamic expansionism, one of the fundamental facts of medieval politics. We forget too easily the seriousness of this threat, which did not abate until two and a half centuries later. In Dante's own day, the Muslims still occupied not only all of North Africa and the Middle East, including the Holy Places, but roughly half of the Iberian peninsula, from which they were expelled only in 1492. Interestingly enough, Dante was not the only medieval Aristotelian to flirt with the idea of a universal empire. His proposal has its parallel in Averroes, who likewise found himself in the situation of having to adjust his speech, if not necessarily his thinking, to the demands of a religion that shared in some way Christianity's universal outlook.[14]

The second reason is internal to Christianity, whose victory over pagan polytheism had introduced into the political life a complication of which Aristotle had no direct experience and which he does not discuss in the *Politics.* Unlike the so-called "city-states" of Aristotle's day, the nations of the West now shared a common religion whose spiritual leader could claim an authority that transcended all national boundaries and thus completely overshadowed that of any local ruler. One way to remedy the situation, and it may have been the only feasible one at the time, was to broaden the scope of imperial rule so as to make it coextensive with that of the pope, but only as long as this could be done with a minimum of prejudice to the freedom of each nation.

In point of fact, Dante's world monarchy is anything but the monolithic structure or the harsh despotism that we associate with the notion of a world empire. It is a political arrangement that respects the national character of its individual components and allows for a notable degree of diversity among them. Its visible head is an emperor who would at long last be installed in his own capital, Rome, over whose territory he himself would rule and from which he would exercise indirect rule over the rest of Christendom, granting to local kings and princes as much latitude as is necessary to legislate for their own constituencies.[15] As the first canto of the *Comedy* puts it, in terms that are amazingly precise,

In all parts he commands (*impera*) and there he rules (*regge*)
there is his lofty city (*città*) and his lofty throne (*seggio*).
O, happy is he whom he elects thereto! (v. 127–129)

Nowhere in the *Comedy* is there any suggestion that the separate entities that then made up the *respublica Christiana* would be robbed of their identity and summoned to transform themselves into a universal and homogeneous society. Surely the last thing Dante wanted was the abolition of the Florentine republic, whose freedom he was more eager than anyone else to preserve.

It is probably in this perspective that one should read *Paradiso* 28 and 29, two cantos devoted to the subject of angels. At this point, Dante and Beatrice penetrate into the *primum mobile,* which separates the heaven of the fixed stars below from the empyrean above and to which, in the economy of the poem, the angelic hierarchies have been assigned. Few parts of the *Comedy* are likely to strike us as more quaintly medieval than the disquisition that follows on the nature and function of these separated substances, their various orders, and the recondite speculations in which on these points scholastic theology was wont to engage. In his introduction to canto 29, Grand gent notes that "to the modern reader such speculations seem otiose" and that "we are perhaps justified in believing that they did not seem very important to Dante."[16] It is doubtful, however, whether Dante, who prides himself on having left no detail to chance in his poem (cf. *Par.,* 22, 53), would have spent as much time as he does on this topic if it had so little to contribute to the development of his theme.

There may again be a simple solution to the problem, which is that the superior beings about whom the poet suddenly has so much to teach stand for the local rulers who in the new order of things have pledged their unbounded allegiance to the emperor, entertain the closest of relationships with him, extend the benefits of his rule to all parts of the world, and have no existence apart from their own subjects. This seemingly odd portrayal of rulers as angels or angel-like creatures is by no means uncommon in the literature of the Middle Ages. It conforms to an old and well established practice that has its twin roots in the biblical and the hellenistic traditions. The Second Book of Samuel had already spoken of King David as being "like the angel of God" and as having been granted "wisdom like the wisdom of the angel of God to know all things that are on earth": *sicut enim angelus Dei, sic et dominus meus rex* (14:17). The same image recurs in a large number of ancient and medieval texts in which kings and princes are endowed with quasi-divine attributes and which speak in like manner of what Ernst Kantorowicz calls their "angelic character." If, in his physical being, the ruler is subject like everyone else to the limitations of mortality, in his corporate being he transcends the purely human order and appears, in Gilbert of Tournai's words, as a likeness of the "holy spirits and angels."[17]

## Dante's Utopianism

This much being said, one has to admit that, both in the *Monarchia* and in the *Comedy,* the concept of a civil society that takes the old Roman empire or, as others prefer to think, the papacy, rather than the Aristotelian polis, as its model is not nearly so transparent as it is sometimes made out to be. It does not take long to realize that Dante's world monarch far exceeds anything that has ever been seen or is likely to be seen in real life. He is nothing less than the embodiment of reason, combining in his person the perfection of wisdom and moral virtue and graced with all the attributes of Plato's philosopher-king, to whom he has often been compared. The point was already made by Guido Vernani, Dante's early adversary, who argues quite rightly that so excellent a human being is not to be found anywhere.[18] What Vernani fails to note is that Dante himself did not think otherwise. His imaginary ruler remains at best a shadowy figure who is not to be identified with any particular incumbent of the office but rather functions as a general standard by which all actual rulers are to be judged. Only by means of such a fiction was it possible to accredit the notion of an overarching political authority that could counterbalance the universal authority of the pope and thus effect what no local ruler would ever be strong enough to accomplish by himself.

Further evidence for the utopian character of Dante's scheme is to be uncovered in the unforgettable story of Count Ugolino in *Inferno* 33, which serves as a prelude to the long-awaited encounter with Lucifer at the bottom of the pit. Ugolino was a Guelph leader who had served as *podestà* of Pisa for a period of ten years. Falsely accused of treason, he was imprisoned in the tower at Pisa, where he was left to die of starvation with his five sons. The vague hint that some of the prisoners resorted to cannibalism only adds to the horror of the tale, which is all the more noteworthy as the details pertaining to the conversation that went on inside the tower had to be invented by the poet. Why this gruesome story has been inserted at this particular juncture of the poem is a question that is not even asked by most interpreters. Like all the other riddles of the *Comedy,* it too has its answer. What we have before us is a figurative account of the demise of

Henry VII, once the embodiment of Dante's political hopes. Not coincidentally, the scene is laid in Pisa, Henry's headquarters in Italy and the place where he is still buried. Henry's death occurred in 1313, eight years before the completion of the *Comedy* and Dante's own death. When, in the text from *Paradiso* 30 to which reference was made a moment ago, Dante spoke of the Roman throne prepared for the "lofty soul of the imperial Henry," he was well aware that Henry would never mount that throne. The statement is another piece of fiction, rendered plausible only by the fact that the year 1300 has been chosen as the dramatic date of the poem. After 1313, Dante could not possibly have had any illusions about the outcome of Henry's Italian expedition. To repeat what was said earlier, his goal was to present, not a future reality, but a standard or a model by which in making political choices his contemporaries could take their bearings.

But we do not need any of these subtle hypotheses in order to convince ourselves that Dante did not anticipate the coming into being of the intrinsically most desirable society. He knew, both from Aristotle and from common human experience, that men's attachment to what belongs to them as individuals will always stand in the way of their becoming perfect lovers of justice. To use the language of *Paradiso,* "I" and "mine" will never mean the same thing among us as "we" and "our" (cf. *Par.,* 19, 10–12). Perfect justice would be attainable if the goods that human beings require for their physical well-being could be shared equally by all, but this is not so. Anyone who appropriates these goods for his own use necessarily deprives others of them and sets up a situation wherein they may be coveted against reason. There are absolute limits, imposed by our bodily nature, to the sharing of material goods, that is to say, of such goods as must be divided before they can be appropriated. In Dante's *Comedy,* as in Plato's *Republic,* perfect justice is achieved only by pretending that the body does not exist.

There was a more specific obstacle to the triumph of justice in the Christian West, namely, the dualism of the spiritual and temporal powers and the nagging tensions to which it continued to give rise. At first glance, Dante's program appears to be equidistant from the caesaropapism of the Eastern Empire, which subordinates papal rule to imperial rule, and the papal theocracy of the Western Empire, recently reasserted by Boniface VIII in the Bull *Unam Sanctam,* which subordinates imperial rule to papal rule. That program, as outlined in the *Monarchia,* calls for the harmonious collaboration of the two highest authorities, each one of which is considered supreme in its own domain. The pope's mission is to lead the human race to the blessedness of eternal life by means of spiritual teachings; the emperor's mission is to lead it to the blessedness of this life by means of philosophic teachings.[19] In the words of *Purgatorio* 16, God wanted the world to be illumined by "two suns," the pope and the emperor, and considered both of them indispensable to its well-being. In practice, this meant that the Church was to renounce its worldly ambitions, divest itself of its wealth and territorial possessions, leave politics to the temporal rulers, and, with the support of the emperor, attend exclusively to spiritual matters.

The only thing wrong with this proposal is that it takes for granted the continuity between imperial rule and papal rule, and, ultimately, between the teachings of natural reason and those of Sacred Scripture, in which these two rules are grounded. Conflicts between the two powers had repeatedly arisen in the past and it was a foregone conclusion that they would not cease unless some provision was made for their adjudication. On Dante's own telling, things are well-ordered when they are reduced to a single principle.[20] Yet his scheme reduced them to two independent principles, adding only that, while neither is subject to the other, Caesar owes to Peter the reverence that a first-born son owes to his father.[21] This last assertion is obviously more of a pious wish than a principle on which emperors can be counted upon to act. Any experienced observer sees right away that Dante's proposal places the Church entirely at the mercy of the temporal ruler, in whose hands all effective power has been concentrated.

## Poetry and Philosophy

This is not the only side of the story, however, for the argument as we have developed it overlooks the fact that a disarmed and spiritual church can be as politically disruptive as a worldly one. This much we know from the example of Savonarola and countless religious reformers across the ages. Something else was needed if the proposed solution was to have any chance of success. With such considerations we come to what, I submit, is the *Comedy's* most original contribution to the theologico-political problem of the Middle Ages.

Historians and students of medieval political theory often complain about Dante's "conservatism," as they like to call it, and dismiss his views as reactionary and nostalgically committed to a conception of society that would soon be relegated to the dustbin of history.[22] One can certainly agree that, by comparison with his illustrious fellow countryman, Machiavelli, Dante would have to be labeled a conservative, although in this instance the term hardly seems appropriate. A conservative in the modern sense is one who resists

change because he thinks that all change is bad, and this Dante never accepted. However much he may have felt that Italian life had deteriorated, he was emphatically not in favor of a simple return to the *status quo ante.* The proof is that the society projected in the *Comedy* contains an element that had hitherto been missing from medieval society and that can be designated by means of a single term: philosophy.

It may be objected that philosophy was not totally foreign to earlier generations of theologians, who since the days of the Church Fathers had managed to integrate it into the fabric of Christian intellectual life. Pertinent as it may be, however, the objection obscures the fact that up to the middle of the thirteenth century or thereabouts, what passed for philosophy in the Western world was not philosophy in its pure state but a philosophy that had been defanged, as it were, and tailored to the needs of the Christian faith. With the rediscovery of Aristotle, that picture was radically altered. The Christian Middle Ages encountered not just a new philosophy but philosophy *tout court.*[23]

This applies to Aristotelian natural philosophy to begin with, but it applies even more to the *Politics,* the last of Aristotle's great treatises to be translated into Latin during the 1260s, the decade in which Dante was born. There is a strong case to be made for the view that Dante himself was the first genuinely political philosopher of the Latin Middle Ages insofar as it fell to him to call philosophy down from the empyrean and introduce it, not indeed into Athens, as Socrates had done, but into the cities and nations of Christendom. No doubt, the groundwork for this endeavor had been laid by Thomas Aquinas, but Thomas is not generally regarded as first and foremost a political thinker. It is not without significance that his commentary on the *Politics* is the only one of his commentaries on Aristotle's major treatises that was never completed. From Thomas one learns next to nothing about the dominant structures and inner tensions of medieval society. What was for Dante the central political issue of the Western world is not even a minor theme of Thomas's works. Although the beginning of his academic career coincides with the death of the brilliant Frederick II (in 1250), one scours his voluminous corpus in vain for any allusion to the fate of the empire or, for that matter, any mention of the emperor. As Etienne Gilson puts it, "This theologian views everything as if the emperor did not exist."[24] In Thomas's opinion, the legitimate heir of the Roman Empire was not the Holy Roman Empire but the spiritual kingdom into which the Rome of old had since been transformed: *transmutatum est de temporali in spirituale* (*In epistulam II ad Thessalonicenses* 2.1.1). Never or only very rarely are the standards of political judgment that were part of his Aristotelian legacy brought to bear on a situation from which, as a thinker who sees all things in the light of eternity, he appears to have been only too eager to prescind. Any use of politics as a practical science is at best latent in him.

Not so with Dante, who found in Aristotle's account of the natural foundations of civil society and the principles of right rule the key to the most pressing problem of his age. In an important but obscure passage of the *Monarchia* (3, 11), Dante indicates that, since the pope and the emperor exercise different kinds of authority, they necessarily belong to different species. From this observation, he infers that their harmony can be secured only by means of a common relationship to a higher being, who is either God himself or a substance lower than God but superior to all other creatures. The term used elsewhere to identify this mysterious substance is the "Point"—*il Punto*—on which, we are told, the heavens and all of nature depend (*Par.,* 28, 41–42) and from which the powers of Peter and Caesar are independently derived (cf. Epist. 5.5).

What is meant by this point, it seems, is either reason itself, the highest principle in the universe—its "empress," as it is called in the *Convivio*—or the embodiment of reason, who could be either God, or, short of that, the human being in whom reason finds its fullest expression, the philosopher. Simply stated, the pope and the emperor would best be able to discharge their functions and would cooperate most effectively with each other if they both accepted to be guided by perfected reason or philosophy. The notion that we finally arrive at is something like the secret royalty of the philosopher, the only person who, because he straddles both worlds, is capable of harmonizing them, reconciling whenever necessary the demands of the Bible with those of the political life.

But this could very well be the most utopian of all the proposals made or hinted at in the *Comedy*, for nothing assures us that the true philosopher will be on hand when needed, or, if he should be, that he will be listened to by either the pope or the emperor. We know not only from Plato's *Republic* but from the events of Dante's time that, far from being welcomed with open arms, philosophers are liable to be held in suspicion, if not actually persecuted, by the religious and political establishments under which they happen to live. The example of Siger of Brabant, so aptly laid before us in *Paradiso* 10—Siger, who, because he was so badly treated, found death "slow in coming" at the early age of forty-four-is there to remind us of this unpleasant fact. St. Bonaventure, who had more than his share of misgivings about philosophy, went so far as to identify it with the knowledge of good and evil, the very knowledge that Adam and Eve had been forbidden to seek.[25] Recent condemnations, such as those of 1270 and 1277 by the bishop of Paris, Etienne

Tempier, had served notice that in such matters only a certain amount of freedom could be tolerated. No, philosophy was not about to make a triumphal entry into the new Jerusalem. In many ways, the tide in high ecclesiastical circles was running against it. Red flags were going up all over the place.

Enter the poet, who in this respect has a decided edge over the philosopher in that he alone can move entire nations, educate the tastes of his fellow countrymen, redirect their affections, and, without their being aware of it, charm them into acquiescing in the vision of beauty and harmony that he wishes to accredit. The task was a gigantic one; it called for a special kind of poetry that would destroy prejudice by building on it and forge a viable consensus out of the *membra disjecta* of a disintegrating Christian society. That logical contradiction of the modern period, philosophical poetry, became the privileged instrument by means of which, as the legislator of legislators, the poet sought to effect an intellectual revolution designed to instill new vitality into the hollow shell of imperial rule.

The new founding achieved its most splendid expression in the *Comedy,* the charter of a regenerated Christendom, in which the timeless wisdom of Greece is rescued from the limbo of Christian theology and seized upon as the integrating principle of a synthesis whose depth and beauty the breakdown of the medieval world and the triumph of modernity have sometimes obscured but never completely erased from our consciousness.

One may still be tempted to ask why, if the specific political program outlined in the *Comedy* had so little chance of success, the poet went to the trouble of elaborating it. The objection, a familiar one, has been leveled not only at Dante but at the entire premodern tradition, which was rejected by the early modern thinkers on the ground that its proponents spent most of their time talking about things that are seldom if ever seen in practice.[26] Better to take Machiavelli's advice and go to the "effectual truth" of the matter than to its imagination.

To this criticism there was a ready answer, which is that human beings usually accomplish more when they are encouraged to raise rather than lower their sights. It is also possible to take the issue a step further and argue that Dante's success was not contingent on the result of his efforts to reform medieval society. In the last analysis, his goal was more philosophic than strictly political. He himself intimates as much when, from the lofty summit of heaven of the fixed stars, he looks back on what lies behind him and says:

> *I turned my eyes down through all the seven spheres*
> *and I saw this globe of ours such*
> *that I smiled at its mean appearance.*
> *And I approve that opinion as best which esteems it*
> *of least account; so that those who think*
> *of something else can be called righteous.*
>
> *(Par. 22, 133–8)*

With these words the poet returns to the highest theme of classical political philosophy. He acknowledges that the political life is inherently incapable of satisfying the deepest longings of the human heart and gives us to understand that the joys which it affords are paltry by comparison with those of the theoretical life. The remarkable thing is that even as regards the theoretical life itself the studied ambiguity of the poem is maintained to the very end. The choice with which we are finally confronted is between a philosophy that owes its greatest dignity to its status as the handmaiden of theology and one that refuses to bow to any higher authority. By and large, I have limited myself to an examination of the political dimension of the poem and especially of the relationship between Peter and Caesar as Dante conceives it. A more complete analysis of his masterpiece would necessitate a parallel study of the relationship between Jerusalem and Athens or between divine revelation and philosophic wisdom, the absolutely highest theme of the *Comedy* and, indeed, of the Western tradition as a whole.

## Notes

1 J. Hertzler, *The History of Utopian Thought* (New York: Macmillan, 1926), 121.

2 Dante, *Epistolae* 10 (to *Can Grande*), no. 15.

3 *Epistolae,* no. 8.

4 See, most recently, P. Dronke, *Dante and Medieval Latin Traditions* (Cambridge, Mass.: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 103–11.

5 Plato, *Republic* IX, 592b.

6 See, for a summary of the classic teaching on this subject, Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* I, q. 1, art. 10.

7 For a concise statement of the problem, cf. esp. W. Ullmann, *"Medieval Monarchy," Sewanee Mediaeval Colloquium Occasional Papers* 1 (spring, 1982): 19–59.

8 The Greek term *Basileus* was used to designate both the king (Latin: *rex*) and the emperor (Latin: *imperator*).

9 Dante rejected the offer because accepting it would have been tantamount to an admission of guilt.

10 The pope died accidentally when the ceiling that supported his library collapsed on him at the papal palace of Viterbo.

11 Charles S. Singleton, *The Divine Comedy, Paradiso 2: Commentary* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1975), 505, ad v. 133–38.

12 Clement, badly in need of Henry's help, had summoned him to Rome to be anointed. Shortly thereafter, having entered into a new coalition with Robert of Naples, he withdrew his support of the emperor, who was left to die with his decimated and ailing army in the plains of Tuscany.

13 *Inferno* IV, 131. Cf. Maimonides, *Guide of the Perplexed,* I, 54; II, 28; III, 12; III, 54.

14 Cf. *Averroes on Plato's Republic,* 45, 20–46, 22, trans. R. Lerner (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1974), 44–46.

15 E.g., *Monarchia* I, 14, where Dante explains that "minute regulations for each city cannot come from the supreme ruler alone, for common laws are sometimes defective and need to be amended, as the Philosopher makes clear in his praise of equity in the *Nicomachean Ethics.* Thus, nations, kingdoms, and cities have their own customs, which must be regulated by different laws."

16 Dante Alighieri, *La Divina Commedia,* ed. and annot. by C. H. Grandgent, rev. by Charles S. Singleton (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1972), 884.

17 E. Kantorowicz, *The King's Two Bodies: A Study in Mediaeval Political Theology* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1957), 8, 271–72, 495, et passim. Gilbert of Tournai, *Eruditio regum et principum* III, 2, ed. A. de Poorter (Louvain: Institut supérieur de Philosophie, 1914), 84.

18 *De reprobatione Monarchiae,* la serie, vol. 6, ed. N. Matteini (Padova: Il Pensiero medioevale, 1958), 98, 7.

19 *Monarchia* III, 15.

20 Ibid., I, 5.

21 Ibid., I, 15, 18.

22 E.g., J. Goudet, *Dante et la politique* (Paris: Aubier-Montaigne, 1969), 190–91. J. LeGoff, *La civilisation de l'Occident médiéval* (Paris: Arthaud, 1967), 587.

23 Cf. E. Gilson, *Etudes de philosophie médiévale* (Strasbourg: Commission des publications de la Faculté des lettres de l'Université de Strasbourg, 1921), 53.

24 E. Gilson, *Dante and Philosophy,* trans. D. Moore (Gloucester, Mass.: Peter Smith, 1968), 172.

25 Third Sunday of Advent, *Sermo 2,* in *Opera,* vol. IX, 62–63.

26 See, *inter multa alia,* Spinoza, *A Political Treatise,* ch. 1, introduction:

> They (the philosophers) conceive of men not as they are but as they themselves would like them to be. Whence it has come to pass that they have generally written satire and have never conceived a theory of politics that could be turned to use but only such as might be taken for a chimera, or might have been formed in Utopia, or in that golden age of the poets when, to be sure, there was least need of it.

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